One Hundred Years Ago

(with extracts from the Alpine Journal)

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(*Plates* 96–98)

> The splendid weather in the Alpine regions during January – a marvellous contrast to the gloom and cold of the preceding summer – naturally induced mountaineers to undertake ascents, which were carried out under unusually favourable circumstances. The marked feature of the Grindelwald winter season was the small quantity of snow. Up to January 11 the village was reached by wheeled vehicles only, sleighs being quite useless.

The early months of 1889 were notable for the settled conditions experienced throughout the Alps, and many winter ascents were completed. During the first three weeks in January the Gross Schreckhorn, the Wetterhorn and the Mönch were all climbed, with local guides, by English parties staying at Grindelwald. On 21 January a large Italian Alpine Club party, with guides and porters, ascended the Gran Paradiso; a month later, on 19 February, Vittorio, Corradino, Erminio and Gaudenzio Sella, with Battista and Daniele Maquignaz, traversed the Dufourspitze of Monte Rosa:

> The party left the Capanna Gnifetti at 3A.M., crossed the Lysjoch, and gained the summit at 12.30 by way of the southern face, the rocks of which were somewhat iced. The sky was clear, but the cold not intense. The descent to the Gorner Glacier by the usual route was not difficult, though a strong wind was rather troublesome on the ridge between the summit and Sattel; but there was so much snow on the glacier, and it was so soft that progress was greatly retarded, and the Riffelhaus was not gained till 4A.M.

On 5 March Alfredo Dalgas and Guiseppe Poggi, accompanied by four guides, climbed the Lyskamm in very fine weather.

As the climbing season approached it was hoped that the unfavourable conditions experienced throughout the Alps during the previous summer would not be repeated, but these hopes were dashed by the bad weather which prevailed in most regions until the end of July. Although very little climbing was possible during the early part of the season, some expeditions were successful. In the Mont Blanc range on 3 June V Attinger, E Colomb and L Kurz – with Justin and Joseph Bessard and François Biselx – made the first ascent of the Grande Lui. On 25 July Attinger and Kurz, with Jean-Baptiste Croz and Joseph Simond, reached the summit of the unclimbed Aiguille de la Lex Blanche, above the Trélatête glacier. In the Pennine Alps on 20 July C Herzog, Samuel Junod, Henri Moulin and Paul Wittnauer, with Justin Bessard, completed the first

ascent of the S ridge of the Combin de Corbassière, now the normal approach to the summit from the Panossière hut.

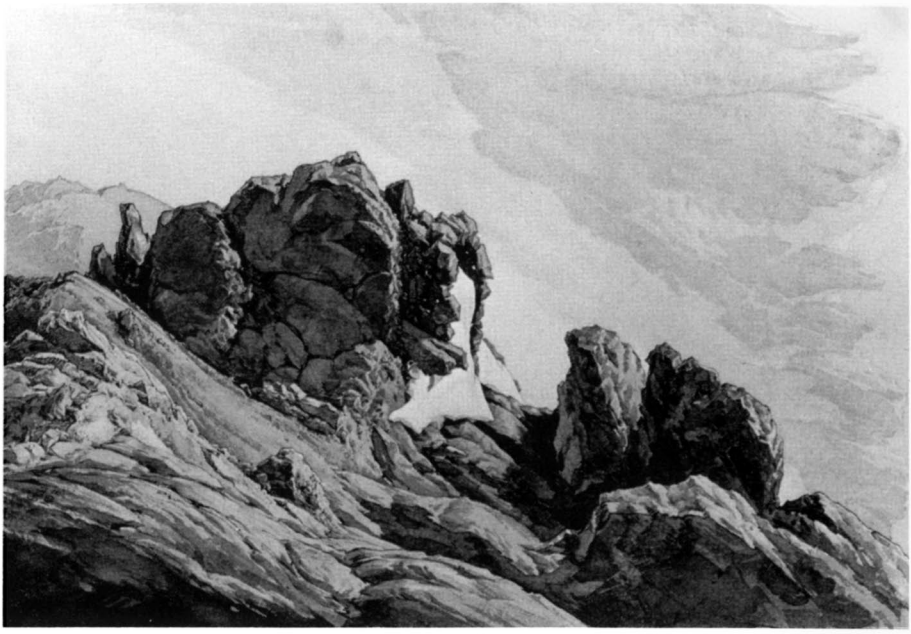
Further east Robert Hans Schmitt and Fritz Drasch, without guides, succeeded in forcing a route up the unclimbed S face of the Dachstein, a remarkable achievement for the period. Having overcome numerous difficulties, they were forced to bivouac after completing most of the route on 14 July and reached the plateau below the highest point on the following day.

Although conditions were far from ideal throughout the summer there was some improvement during the second half of the climbing season, and many parties were able to take advantage of short periods of fine weather as the search for new routes continued. In the Pennine Alps the first ascent of the W, or Ferpècle, ridge of the Dent Blanche – which had been descended five years earlier – was completed by Walter Gröbli, with Aloys Pollinger, on 29 July. Some weeks later, on 2 September, Oscar Eckenstein, with Matthias Zurbriggen, ascended the Dent Blanche by way of the dangerous SE face and the ENE ridge, 'a route which is believed to be the worst yet taken'. On 31 August H W Topham, with Pollinger and Aloys Supersaxo, completed a new route to the summit of the Dent d'Hérens by way of the Col des Grandes Murailles and the upper shoulder of the E ridge. By climbing the ridge from the shoulder, the party became the first to reach the summit from this direction, although many years were to elapse before an ascent of the entire ridge was achieved. In the same region George Broke, with Adolf and Xavier Andenmatten, made the first ascent of the W ridge, or Rotgrat, of the Alphubel.

Other ridges ascended for the first time were the Cresta del Marlet, the NE ridge of the Cima Ortles, on 22 August, by Otto Fischer, Ludwig Friedmann, Robert Schmitt, Edward Matasek and Albrecht von Krafft, without guides; the N ridge of the Bessanese, a classic ridge climb in the Graian Alps, by Guido Rey, with Antonio Castagneri, on 2 September; and the SSE ridge of the Dôme de Rochefort in the Mont Blanc range on 14 September by William Muir, with Emile Rey and David Promont. Another climb of note, also in the Mont Blanc range, was the first guideless ascent, on 3 August, of the Aiguille des Grands Charmoz, by H W Henderson, G H Morse, J H Wicks and Claude Wilson. Five days later, in the Dauphiné, A Reynier, with Pierre Gaspard senior, Christophe Clot and Joseph Turc, made the first ascent of the central peak of the Ailefroide.

In August the Queen of Italy, who in the previous summer had demonstrated her enthusiasm for the high mountains by reaching the Col du Géant, stayed in the Gressoney valley and made many excursions among the neighbouring hills:

> The most considerable expedition undertaken by her Majesty was an excursion to Zermatt, which was reached on August 20 by way of the Betta Furka, Cimes Blanches, and St. Théodule. The weather was, unfortunately, very bad during her sojourn at Zermatt, but on August 24 the Queen went to the Gornergrat, where she drank to the health of the Queen of Great Britain, in acknowledgement of the cheers of an English party on the summit. On August 26 her



96. *The Last Bivouac.* (p 219)



97. *Vignemale N face.* (p 219)

> Majesty ascended the Breithorn, spending two nights at the St. Théodule inn, and regaining Gressoney St. Jean next day by the same route as that by which she had come. The Breithorn is as yet the loftiest point which has ever been reached by a reigning European sovereign.

Following the disappearance of W F Donkin and Harry Fox – with the guides Kaspar Streich and Johann Fischer – in the previous year during an attempt to climb Koshtantau (5145m), no conclusive trace of the missing climbers had been found and, as rumours of foul play by the local inhabitants were rife, a strong search party consisting of C T Dent, D W Freshfield, C H Powell and Hermann Woolley, with Christian Jossi, Johann Kaufmann, Kaspar Maurer and Johann Fischer's brother Andreas went out to the Caucasus in July. Addressing the Alpine Club in the following February, Dent explained that 'our chief hope was that we should find a bivouac, and that we should be able to infer from this the probable movements of the party, and also the directions in which any further search that might be necessary should be prosecuted'.

It was clear from notes left by Fox which had been entrusted to a local porter that, after an unsuccessful attempt on the N ridge of Koshtantau, the party had intended to cross the Ullu-auz pass below the E ridge and seek a route from the south. The search party therefore decided to approach from the south, through the Tiutiun valley, in the hope of meeting the route taken by Donkin and Fox. After a careful reconnaissance by Freshfield, the pass and a steep but broken rock rib leading to it were identified. Dent recalled that during the ascent of the rib

> . . . from time to time an opportunity would be found of gazing to the right or left, but progress was tolerably continuous. Maurer, who was leading, looked upwards now and again as he worked out the best line of ascent, but the rocks were so steep that he could only see a very few feet. Just about midday, as he stopped for a moment to look upwards, I saw his expression suddenly change. 'Herr Gott!' he gasped out, 'the sleeping-place!' I think I shall never forget the thrill the words sent through me. A hurried glance up and we saw, some six or eight feet above the leader, a low wall of stones. In a moment we were all together within the little enclosure, or on the narrow ledge by its side. The suddenness of the discovery was for a few moments overpowering. We had felt certain that some such bivouac existed. We believed that we should find it. We knew for an absolute certainty that nothing more than evidence of a fatal accident could be obtained, and yet the blow came as if freshly inflicted.
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> The sleeping-place consisted of a wall of stones, carefully built, about two feet high, and of horseshoe shape. The circle was completed by an overhanging rock at the back. The enclosure measured about six feet across, and some eight feet in length. Carefully arranged in this space, and almost entirely covered by the snow which had drifted and fallen into it, we could just make out

> the sleeping-bags with two mackintosh coats spread over them. A cooking-pan half full of water was placed ready for use under a stone, and, close by, a loaded revolver hung from a projecting splinter of rock. There was a good store of provisions. No rope was to be seen. Donkin's camera too was absent. He had doubtless, according to his usual custom, taken it with him, intending to carry it as far as possible. I think none who were present will ever lose the power of recalling the scene in the minutest details. As we stood there the explanation of what had happened eleven months before was as clear as if we had found a written description. The character of the place has been reproduced for us by Mr. Willink's skill with surprising accuracy, the drawing being founded on a sketch made on the spot by Capt. Powell.

Freshfield and Woolley, with Jossi, continued to the pass where a small cairn was found. It was concluded that Donkin and Fox and their guides, after reaching the pass from the other side and bivouacking on the rock rib below, decided not to descend the rib to reach the Tiutiun glacier and fell to their deaths while attempting to traverse the steep cliffs below the difficult E ridge. This conclusion was greeted with relief by the local inhabitants, and it was accepted by the authorities that the missing climbers had lost their lives as a result of a mountaineering accident.

While in the Caucasus, Woolley, who had climbed Kazbek (5047m) on 13 July with the three guides and Fischer, reached, with Jossi, the unclimbed E peak of Mishirgi (4918m) on 5 August. This expedition provided another opportunity to examine the W and S ridges of Koshtantau and on 8 August Woolley, accompanied by Jossi, Kaufmann and a local hunter, set out with the intention of finding a route to the summit. On reaching the Tiutiun glacier the hunter could not continue and when he

> . . . saw us preparing to cross the ice-fall he was obviously much impressed by the gravity of our undertaking, and showed his solicitude in various ways. First he asked me to give him a portion of his pay; then he produced his untouched breakfast (rye-bread and cold mutton), and pressed us to take it; finally he shook us each by the hand, making, for him, a long speech in the Tatar dialect, which we took to be a parting benediction; and after our departure he sat for a long time on a hillock watching our progress with evident misgiving and disapproval.

Woolley and the two guides bivouacked beside the Tiutiun glacier and on the following day continued up the glacier to reach the S ridge. After ascending for some way Kaufmann, who had been unwell, was forced to rest, but Woolley and Jossi went on up the ridge in deteriorating conditions to complete the first ascent of the peak. Woolley later recalled that 'the gloomy, threatening sky and driving masses of cloud gave to the scene a peculiarly impressive character of wildness and desolation'.

After being overtaken by darkness during the descent Woolley was

relieved to regain the bivouac where 'as plenty of wood was left, a cheerful fire was soon blazing under our kettle. The soup was a brilliant success, and before long we were wrapped in sleep, sound enough in my case to defy even the sharp ridges of the miniature Schreckhorn, which formed such a prominent feature of my couch.'

Ten days later, on 19 August, Woolley, with Jossi, made the first ascent of Ailama (4523m), to the SE of Shkhara. Before leaving the range he also climbed Elbruz (5633m) with both guides and made two unsuccessful attempts to reach the S and higher summit of Ushba (4710m). Freshfield and Powell climbed the N peak of Laila and made a number of explorations in the Bezingi and Adyrsu regions. Another visitor to the Caucasus was Vittorio Sella who, with his brother Erminio, the guide Daniele Maquignaz and three porters, travelled extensively throughout the range, taking many fine photographs, climbing Elbruz and making the first ascents of Ullu-auz Bashi (4679m), to the N of Koshtantau, and the central, highest, peak of Laila (3986m).

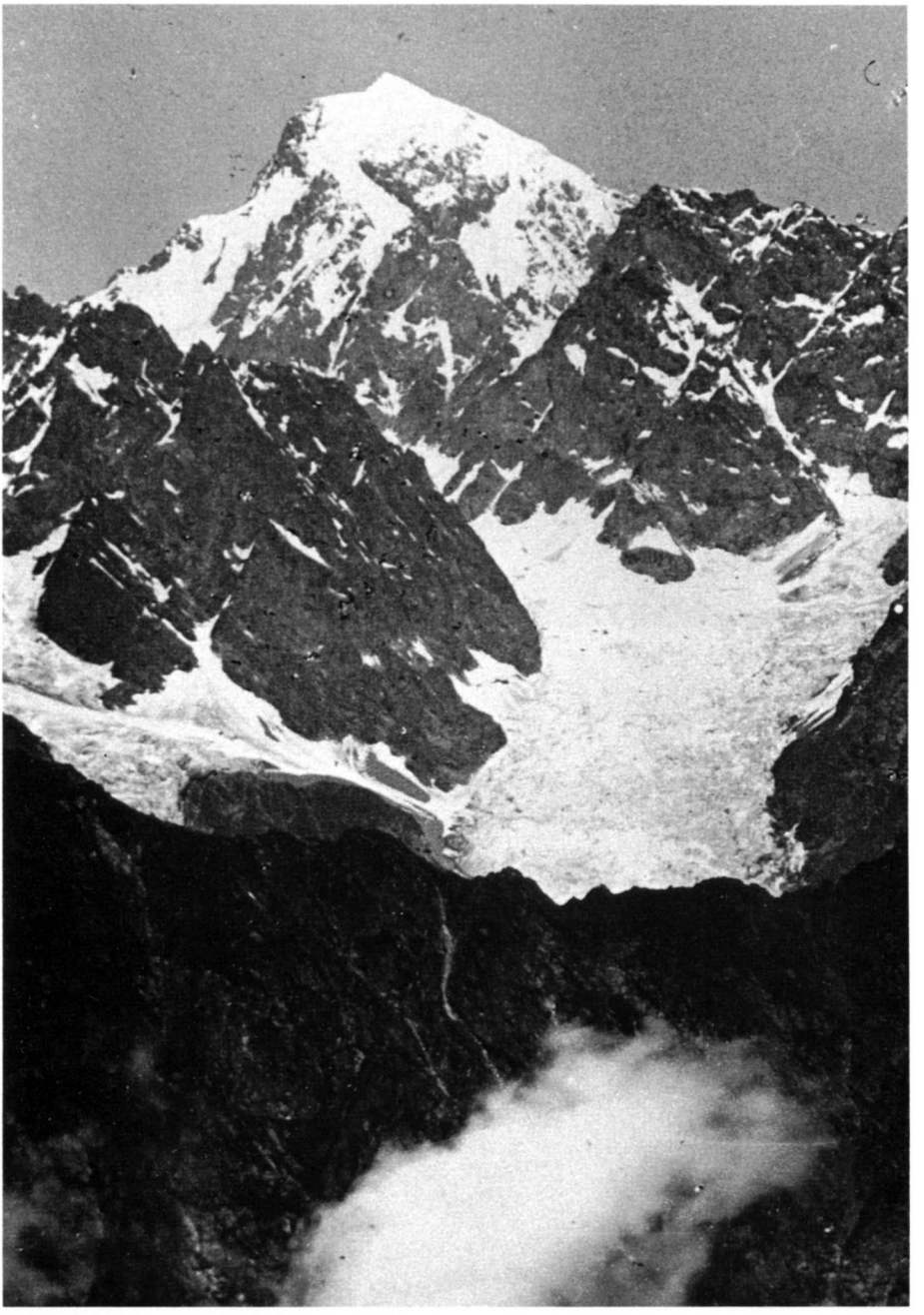
In the Pyrenees an outstanding climb for the period was the first ascent of the Couloir de Gaube in the N face of the Vignemale by Henri Brulle, Jean Bazillac and Roger de Monts, with Célestin Passet and François Bernard Salles, on 7 August. It is recorded that while descending after the climb the party celebrated this remarkable achievement with drinks offered by Count Henri Russell, who was staying in one of his grottoes on the mountain.

Several expeditions of note were completed in more distant regions. In East Africa Hans Meyer, the Leipzig geographer, and Ludwig Purtscheller of Salzburg made the first ascent of Kibo (5895m), the highest peak of Kilimanjaro. Meyer, who had attained a height of approximately 5500m on Kibo two years earlier, and Purtscheller reached the main crater rim by way of the Ratzel glacier on 3 October, but were too late to continue the ascent and returned to their camp on the saddle between Kibo and the neighbouring peak of Mawenzi (5149m). Two days later they

> . . . reached, after five hours' scrambling, a 'roomy lava-cave' much nearer to the peak. Starting thence at 3a.m. on the 6th, they gained their previous position by 8.45, and turning to the left followed the ridge to the summit. Three small rocky peaks rise through the ice, each of which they climbed, and found that the middle one was the highest. At 10.45 they planted the German flag and named the rocky tooth 'Kaiser Wilhelm-Spitze'.

Meyer and Purtscheller then turned their attention to the more difficult Mawenzi. Although the highest point – now known as Hans Meyer Peak – was not reached, they succeeded on 15 October in making the first ascent of one of the other Mawenzi peaks, identified from Meyer's account of the climb as the peak now named Klute Peak (5095m).

In Papua New Guinea, on 11 June, a party led by Sir William MacGregor made the first known ascent of the highest peak in the Owen Stanley range (4072m), some 75km north-east of Port Moresby. Starting on 17 May from a camp beside the Vanapa river the party encountered difficult terrain, including dense rain forest, during the long approach to the peak, which was named Mount Victoria.



98. Koshtantau 1889. (p 219)

In Mexico on 3 November James de Salis led the first recorded ascent of Ixtaccihuatl (5286m), one of the three high volcanoes to the south-east of Mexico City.

In the Karakoram Francis Younghusband, who had been sent to investigate raids on caravans crossing the Karakoram pass and to search for other passes in the range, continued his exploration of the region. Despite indifferent weather, Younghusband crossed several high passes with his ponies and a small Gurkha escort, discovering the Gasherbrum and Urdok glaciers in the course of his travels.

At home, on 17 March, Geoffrey Hastings made the second ascent of the Napes Needle, at the front of the Needle Ridge on Great Gable. The Needle, which had been climbed by W P Haskett-Smith nearly three years earlier, was also climbed by F Wellford, on 22 June, and John Wilson Robinson, on 12 August. In Scotland the development of climbing was given a considerable impetus by the foundation of two climbing clubs. The first of these, the Cairngorm Club, was formally constituted at a meeting in Aberdeen on 9 January. A few weeks later, on 11 February, at a meeting in Glasgow, it was decided to form a club which, it was suggested, should be called 'A Scottish Alpine Club'. As one of the original members later recalled, 'exception was taken to this on the grounds that it would possibly diminish its significance by contrasting it with "The Alpine Club". On the other hand, to call it "The Scottish Mountaineering Club" would give it a sufficiently distinctive designation and lead to no invidious comparisons.'

On 21 October the death occurred of John Ball, the first President of the Alpine Club, the editor of the first volume of *Peaks, Passes and Glaciers* – the forerunner of the *Alpine Journal* – and the author of the three volumes of the *Alpine Guide*. W A B Coolidge, writing in the *Alpine Journal* for November 1889, the last number to be published under his editorship, described the *Alpine Guide* as

> . . . the first of Alpine classics. I have had over twenty years' experience of this guide-book, largely in those parts of the Alps least known even to Mr. Ball; and I wish to place on record my profound admiration of the amazing success with which the author has firmly grasped the main lines of the topography of the most unfrequented districts; so that all his followers have had to do has been to fill in the outline sketched out with so masterly a hand. I venture to state with the utmost confidence that no one man has ever possessed a wider or a more thorough knowledge of the entire chain of the Alps than Mr. Ball.

In conclusion, it seems appropriate to recall the following extract from Dent's valedictory address, read before the Alpine Club on 16 December 1889:

> I confess to agreeing with those who believe that mountaineering can never become wholly free from peril. The greater the experience and the more that experience is utilised the less will be the risk; but some risk there will ever be. Unfortunately the peril

> has not yet nearly reached its minimum point. It can hardly be gainsaid that a small proportion of the accidents that occur are a reproach to mountaineering. Such as these it is the especial duty of this Club to guard against to the utmost of its ability. There is room for further efforts. By discouraging mountaineering which is but flashy athleticism, by bearing constantly in mind that a wholesome responsibility attaches to our Society which is at once a burden and a privilege not to be thrown off, and by maintaining a respect for a sport which even a golf-player has been known to admit to be in some points superior to that seductive game, we may not indeed wholly eliminate what is ineradicable, but we may whittle the element of reproach down to vanishing point. And this brings me face to face with the question so often asked by unbelievers – Is the game, then, worth the candle? To that my answer is, unhesitatingly, Yes! and still yes! even when the question is asked of mountaineering which can neither plead the excuse of scientific aims nor the justification of new exploration.

The game is, of course, still worth the candle.