One Hundred Years Ago

(with extracts from the Alpine Journal)

C A RUSSELL

(Plates 83–86)

Although the weather experienced in many parts of the Alps during the opening days of January 1891 was unsettled, with reports of violent winds and very low temperatures, conditions slowly improved as the month progressed and several winter expeditions of note were completed. In the Mont Blanc range on 14 January Paul Güssfeldt with a party including Emile Rey and David Proment made the first winter ascent of the Grandes Jorasses, reaching the summit by way of the SW face. The ascent was carefully planned and 'a great track had been made by a party of men sent some days before to clear the way as far as the Italian Club hut.' Any route to Pointe Walker, the highest peak, is a fine expedition and the climb was a considerable achievement, even for this formidable party.

Later in the month Güssfeldt, with Rey, Proment and two porters climbed the Gran Paradiso. 'The ascent of this peak by Dr Güssfeldt on January 25 last, though not the first that has been made in winter, deserves record as a remarkable performance.' The party succeeded 'after two false starts, in getting off from the Rifugio Vittorio Emanuele a few minutes before midnight on the 24th, reached the summit at 4.30, remained there twenty minutes and returned to the Rifugio at seven, thus accomplishing the whole excursion before sunrise. They were, however, favoured with a brilliant moon.'

In the Bernina Alps on 20 February Mrs Elizabeth Main[1] and W H Bulpett, with Martin Schocher and Martin Weibel, completed the first winter traverse of the three summits of Piz Palü and the first winter ascent of the central, highest, peak. Starting from the Boval hut the party reached the W ridge at the Bellavista pass. 'The day was warm and still, the ridge in an excellent state and the rocks free from ice. From the highest peak to the third peak took more than one and a half hour, owing to the icy condition of the ridge and the consequent step-cutting. After spending some time on the third peak, the climbers left it at 2.00P.M. and all went well till they were within a few feet of the point at which the ridge is generally finally quitted. Here an enormous bergshrund had split the slope asunder, and the party were forced on to the Italian side of the arête in order to turn it. The slope was of smooth blue ice, and took nearly an hour's hard work in step-cutting before it could be descended, though the distance was only about 30 feet.'

As the winter snows receded it was hoped that conditions during the climbing season would, at the very least, be better than those experienced

throughout the Alps in the previous year. It is clear, however, from the following account that such hopes were not fulfilled.

> The past season in Switzerland will long be remembered by Alpine climbers as the one in which all previous records of bad mountaineering weather were broken; and no less an authority than Melchior Anderegg, the great Oberland guide, speaks of '1891' as being the worst of all the many seasons he ever experienced in the Alps since he began climbing in 1858. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that, with the exception of occasional breaks of fine weather, two days out of every five were bad ones; and this, together with the unusual quantity of snow and *verglas* on the rocks, combined to make the ascent of the more difficult peaks almost impossible. The mere fact that only five ascents were made of the Matterhorn (a peak which in ordinary seasons is climbed between twenty and thirty times) shows what unfavourable conditions mountaineers had to contend with. These ascents were made by the easiest route from Zermatt, whilst no one succeeded either in crossing the great mountain or in reaching its summit from the Italian side. In the Oberland and at Chamonix, both guides and amateurs watched for the sunshine which never came, in spite of the misleading hopes so often held out by their aneroids and by those weather signs which for years past have always been held to be infallible.

In such circumstances, it was not surprising that many parties were confined to the lower peaks. In the Pennine Alps two new routes were recorded in the chain of Les Maisons Blanches, the rock peaks at the head of the Corbassière glacier below the N flank of the Grand Combin, and on 21 July G W Prothero and Walter Leaf with Clemenz Zurbriggen made the first ascent of Le Ritord, on the ridge to the north of that chain. In the Arolla district on 27 July A G Topham with Jean Maître and Pierre Maurys completed the first traverse of the ridge between the Pointe des Genevois, the highest peak of the Dents de Perroc, and the central peak or Dent de Perroc. Further east several new climbs were completed by determined parties. On 18 July C H Gould and George Broke, with Adolf Andenmatten and Aloys Burgener, made the first recorded ascent of the upper section of the SW ridge of the Strahlhorn, above the Alderhorn, and on 15 August Ludwig Norman-Neruda and May Peyton, his future wife, with Christian Klucker reached the summit of the Pointe de Zinal by way of the unclimbed S ridge. On 25 August a direct route was forced up the steep NE face of the Alphubel, above the Längfluh rocks, by A F de Fonblanque with Xaver Imseng and Isidor Bumann.

A few days later, on 2 September, a party including C G Monro and O G Jones, with Antoine Bovier and Pierre Gaspoz, made the first recorded ascent of the Dent des Rosses above Ferpècle and on 3 September Monro and Jones, without guides, completed the first ascent of the E ridge of the Grande Dent de Veisivi on their way to Arolla. The party then crossed to the southern side of the

main chain and Monro later recalled that 'we left Arolla feeling sad, for the previous evening, at table d'hôte, we had seen a dreadful sight, in the shape of an individual, of the male sex moreover, in full evening dress. The significance of this incident was enforced by the recollection that the last time I had fed at that table I was clad in a somewhat airy costume consisting chiefly of stockings and mackintosh.' On 10 September, starting from an establishment 'in which an all-pervading bovine odour was present, which was not wonderful, inasmuch as through the extensive chinks in the flooring the backs of the cows could easily be seen', the party approached the S side of the Grand Combin massif where Jones and the two guides made the first ascent of the SE ridge of the Combin de Grafeneire.

The one region 'which was blessed with a modicum of the fine weather denied to so many other quarters of the Alps' was the Dauphiné and it was here that the principal expedition of the season was completed. On 13 July J H Gibson, with Ulrich Almer and Fritz Boss, made the first traverse of the E, summit ridge of the Meije from the Grand Pic or Pic Occidental to the Pic Central. It was only the second time that the ridge had been traversed, the route having been completed in the reverse direction by the guideless party of the Zsigmondy brothers and Ludwig Purtscheller six years earlier. Addressing the Alpine Club in the following year Gibson explained that after reaching the Grand Pic by way of the Promontoire spur they were able to examine the real turning-point of the climb,

> the western face of the westernmost tooth. We noticed at once that a few feet below the top there hung what was apparently a fragment of Zsigmondy and Purtscheller's rope, but whether our way was clear or not it was impossible at that distance to tell. But what struck us more than anything was that we saw we were not to be the first party to try the arête that season. Right along the crests of the two western and across the northern faces of the two eastern teeth – that is to say, along the identical route we proposed to traverse – ran a continuous well-defined line of footmarks. That the party, whoever it was, had not got any further, however, was evident at a glance. The snow of the Brèche Zsigmondy was untouched, and we might still hope to be the second party to traverse the whole length of the ridge.

After descending safely to the Brèche Zsigmondy the party 'advanced towards the rocks of the westernmost tooth, our excitement rising as we neared them. If the rocks would "go" at all, it was at one place, and one place only; a narrow crack, which, starting from near the base of the crag, runs diagonally upwards towards the left for about fifteen feet or so, and then bends round on to the northern slope of the tooth.' With considerable skill Almer climbed the crack and worked his way up the slope to the top of the tooth. Gibson added that 'the slope is tremendously steep, the rocks loose and ice-coated, and there is not a good grip to be got anywhere. I can confidently recommend the view of La Grave and the valley of the Romanche to be seen from this coign of vantage; but

it is too theatrical for people troubled with weak heads.' Before completing the route the party looked along the ridge to the Pic Central.

> The situation is a striking one. On the left was the slope of 70° up which we had just come, on the right the continuous wall of precipice that forms the southern face of the mountain, at our backs was the cliff that overhangs the Brèche Zsigmondy, and in front of us lay the sharpest knife-edge I have ever seen. The mystery of the footmarks I spoke of before was now cleared up: a party had indeed been on the ridge – not of men, but of chamois.

The traverse from the Grand Pic to the Pic Central, still regarded as one of the finest expeditions in the Alps, was an outstanding achievement for the period, comparable in historical importance with the first traverse of the ridge.

Other climbs of note in the Dauphiné were the first ascent of the NW face of Pointe Durand, the lower summit of Mont Pelvoux, by F E L Swan with Pierre Gaspard père and Maximin Gaspard on 10 July and an ascent of the unclimbed NE ridge of Le Plaret on 18 July by the guideless party of G H Morse, C H Pasteur and J H Wicks.

Despite the unfavourable weather a number of new expeditions was completed in other districts. In the Graian Alps on 3 August G Stallard and A L Ormerod with Johannes Ogi-Müller and Abraham Müller made the first traverse of Mont Herbetet, ascending the E ridge and descending by way of the NNE ridge. In the Bregaglia group A von Rydzewski with Klucker and Mansueto Barbaria reached the summits of several unclimbed peaks including the Torrone Centrale, at the head of the Forno glacier, on 8 July and, on 12 July, the Punta Pioda di Sciora in the Sciora chain. In the Austrian Alps V J Pillwax with S Huter and P Untersberger made the first ascent of the S face of the Grossglockner, crossing the long couloir – now known as the Pillwax couloir – which divides the face below the Obere Glocknerscharte. The S face is nearly 600m high and the first climb, like the first ascent of the couloir in the E face by the Pallavicini party 15 years earlier, was a remarkable achievement in advance of its time.

In the Dolomites the highest point of the Fünffingerspitze or Punta delle Cinque Dita, which had been climbed by the guideless party of Robert Hans Schmitt and Johann Santner in the previous year, was reached by no less than four parties at the end of the season. On 4 September Norman-Neruda, accompanied by Klucker, approached the peak from the north hoping to make the second ascent. In a paper read before the Alpine Club in the following June Neruda recalled that after Klucker had led up a series of difficult chimneys in the N face they were both surprised to hear voices. On completing the climb Neruda found that the Dutch climber Jeanne Immink – who was to make the first winter ascent of the Croda da Lago on 10 December – and her guides Antonio Dimai and Giuseppe Zecchini had arrived at the summit a few minutes earlier after making the second ascent of the route on the S side taken by Schmitt and Santner. Neruda added that the Fünffingerspitze 'is the most difficult rock-climb I have ever done. The Kleine Zinne, the Croda da Lago, the Cima di

Canali, the Cima della Madonna, and other peaks of reputed great difficulty I have climbed cannot for one moment be compared with it; in fact, they are mere child's play by its side.'

Following his ascent to the new Vallot observatory and the summit of Mont Blanc in the previous year Dr J Janssen, the astronomer, 'was struck with the advantages to science of an observatory on the actual summit.' After the necessary funds had been raised preliminary studies were carried out by A G Eiffel, the celebrated engineer. 'Here especially it was essential that "the house should be founded on a rock", and the first point to ascertain was how near the rock approaches to the summit of the Calotte.' During August and September a tunnel was driven through the ice, many of the workmen being incapacitated by frostbite.

> M Eiffel had determined that, in order to be successful, a platform of rock must be found at a depth not exceeding 12 mètres below the surface. The tunnel in the ice was commenced on the N side towards the Petits Mulets, at an elevation of 14 mètres below the summit, and was carried horizontally for 29.4 mètres, till the boring corresponded with the actual summit, but no rock had been found. Though the gallery was subsequently carried 23 mètres further beneath the snow, still no rock was touched.

Janssen then decided to erect the observatory on snow and a wooden hut 'capable of accommodating two persons, with an arrangement whereby any vertical or horizontal movement can be observed' was placed on the summit.

As work on the tunnel progressed a hut built on a proper base was being completed not far away. 'The Turin section of the C.A.I. opened in August a hut on a spur of the Aiguille Grise, on the right bank of the Glacier du Dôme, at a height of about 10,500 feet. This hut is known as the *Capanna del Dôme*.' The first party to ascend Mont Blanc from the Dôme, or Gonella, hut was that of Francesco Gonella who with Julian Proment and Joseph Croux reached the summit on 13 August. Further along the chain the construction of another famous refuge was completed at Gressoney. 'When the Queen of Italy visited that place on August 15 it was put together, and, after an open-air Mass had been said near it, her Majesty was pleased to "christen" it in her own name, and it will be known as the "Capanna alla Regina Margherita".'

On 10 July the death occurred of Alexander Seiler, the great hotelier who as the hospitable proprietor of the Monte Rosa Hotel had welcomed many climbers to Zermatt. Writing in the *Alpine Journal* Leslie Stephen described Seiler as 'the best of all landlords of Alpine hotels' who in spite of change had 'preserved the qualities which had first gained for him the respect and friendship of a whole generation of travellers.'

Later in July a major engineering project which had been completed received official approval. 'The Federal Inspector of Railways has been over the new line from Viège to Zermatt, and authorized its being opened for passenger traffic; trains are now, therefore, running daily.'

In the Caucasus equally bad weather was experienced by Gottfried

Merzbacher and Purtscheller who, with the guides Johann Kehrer and Johann Unterweger, were the only climbers to visit the range. Despite unfavourable conditions this determined party climbed extensively, attaining the ridge between the two summits of Ushba on 24 July during an attempt to reach the S, higher, summit (4710m) and scaling Elbrus (5633m) and other high peaks. On 21 August the party completed the first ascent of the central and highest peak of Dongus Orun (4454m) in a bitter NW wind. After three hours of mixed climbing

> a rock ridge was gained which abuts right against the peak. This ridge was narrow and broken by all sorts of obstacles. The rocks were covered with powdery snow, slightly frozen. Immediately below the peak the ridge rose steeply in a series of smooth bossed rocks, covered with snow and ice. The ascent of these was plainly difficult and dangerous; a couloir which offered an alternative route was only to be reached by a dangerous traverse. Meanwhile Unterweger had climbed the first cliff, and thought it would be better farther up. The rest followed, to find things only got worse – advance was doubtful, retreat impossible. The ascent of 120m took two hours, and not for a moment were they out of danger. When the upper snow-slopes were reached they sank in deep, but it seemed an easy promenade to the N peak, and along a broad ridge to the central peak.

After Purtscheller's departure Merzbacher and the guides travelled for some distance along the chain, climbing Kasbek (5047m) on 30 September and, on 4 October, completing the first ascent of Gimarai Khokh (4776m).

In October Francis Younghusband crossed the Karakoram on his way to India after wintering in Kashgar and continuing his exploration of the Pamir region. After ascending a valley near the Wakhjir pass his party reached the head of a glacier where a magnificent view presented itself. 'Here we were among the real mountain monarchs once more. We saw before us an amphitheatre of snowy peaks glittering in the fading sunlight, and at their foot one vast snowfield, the depository of all their surplus snow and ice. This nook of mountains was the very Heart of Central Asia.'

Gilgit was reached on 13 October and a few days later Younghusband crossed the last pass on his way south.

> Another journey had been accomplished; all the difficulties and all the anxieties of it were now over. The sun set in a glow of glory. The snows of the mountain summits were tinged with ruddy hues, the fleecy clouds overhead were suffused in ever-changing colours; then slowly the peaks in the distant east grew grey, the warm tints faded from the scene, one by one the stars pierced through the skies, and night settled down upon the mountains.

Still further afield two famous mountaineering clubs were founded during the year.

> The New Zealand Alpine Club is now fairly launched. At a meeting held on July 28, at Christchurch, twenty-seven members and five 'subscribers' were elected, rules were considered and adopted, and officers were appointed. Mr L Harper is president; Mr A P Harper, secretary; Mr G E Mannering, editor of the journal. 'Subscribers' will have the privileges of the club, but no voice in its management.

Interest in the Southern Alps was increased by the publication of Mannering's book *With Axe and Rope in the New Zealand Alps* in which he gave a spirited account of his own experiences in the region.

In South Africa the formation of a mountain club had been suggested by the botanist Dr Rudolph Marloth and in September the suggestion was taken up by the *Cape Times*. At a public meeting held in Cape Town on 9 October a provisional committee, which included Dr Marloth, was elected and 60 members were identified. On 4 November the Mountain Club of South Africa held its first meeting, electing Sir James Sivewright, a member of Cecil Rhodes's cabinet, as the President. Sir James was the first of many distinguished public figures, including Rhodes himself and J C Smuts, who have belonged to the ranks of the Mountain Club.

At home an important climb was completed in the Lake District on 27 July when W P Haskett Smith, Geoffrey Hastings and W C Slingsby made the first ascent of the North Climb on the Pillar Rock. The climb was a remarkable feat for the period and Haskett Smith advised that 'it should not be touched except by experienced climbers.' At Easter Jones, accompanied by W E Sumpner, made his first ascent of the Napes Needle, a climb which he repeated with Sumpner a few days later. On the Isle of Skye a notable achievement was the first crossing of the Thearlaich-Dubh gap in the main Cuillin ridge by J N Collie and W W King with John Mackenzie.

In September an event of considerable interest was the publication in the *Scottish Mountaineering Club Journal* of 'Tables giving all the Scottish Mountains exceeding 3000 feet in height', the lists compiled by H T Munro. The tables were soon in demand and the climbing of 'Munros' has become a popular pursuit.

By August 1891, when celebrations were held to mark the sixth centenary of the Swiss Confederation, Zermatt and the other great Alpine centres were already experiencing the process of inevitable change described by Stephen as 'only part of a much wider change, of which it is useless, and would therefore be idle, to complain.' It seems appropriate to conclude this account with the following extract from a review which appeared at the end of the climbing season.

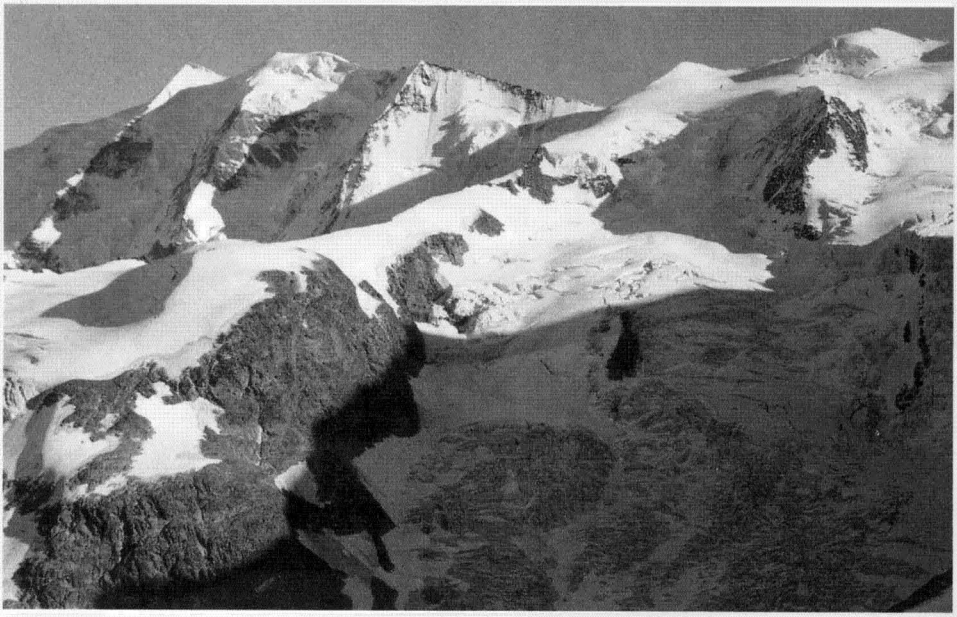
> The railway to Zermatt has been completed, and the little village which remained so long the stronghold of Alpine climbers is at last invaded by enterprising tourist agents and their following, whom they tempt to visit the valley by inducements similar to those held out to the thousands who pass 'nine hours at Brighton for three

shillings.' Grindelwald, too, is a railway terminus, and the red and white posts one sees from the road near Sallanches warn us that the same fate is in store for Chamonix. Still, the rising generation of climbers ignore these changes, and flock in numbers to the old 'Playground of Europe.' In spite of the altered surroundings the great snow peaks seem to afford as much pleasure and enjoyment to them as they did to the little band who first made war against the mountain giants.

REFERENCE

1 Better known as Mrs Aubrey le Blond, the founder and first President of the Ladies' Alpine Club.

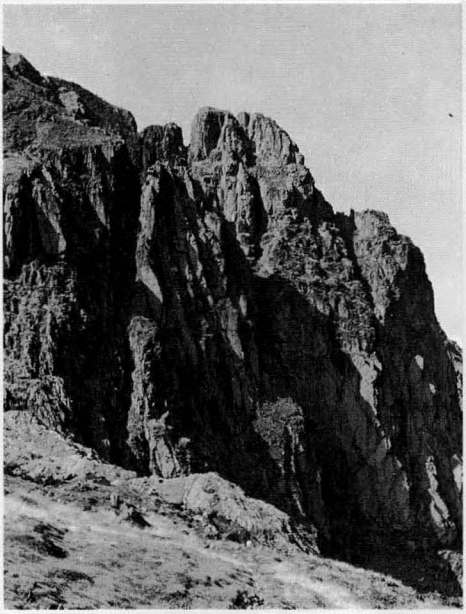
(*Editor's Note.* This article is the twenty-first in an annual series which started in 1971. On the occasion of this 'coming-of-age' I would like to express, on behalf of the Alpine Club, our thanks to our member C A Russell for his contributions, invariably prepared with meticulous care and always of great historical interest.)



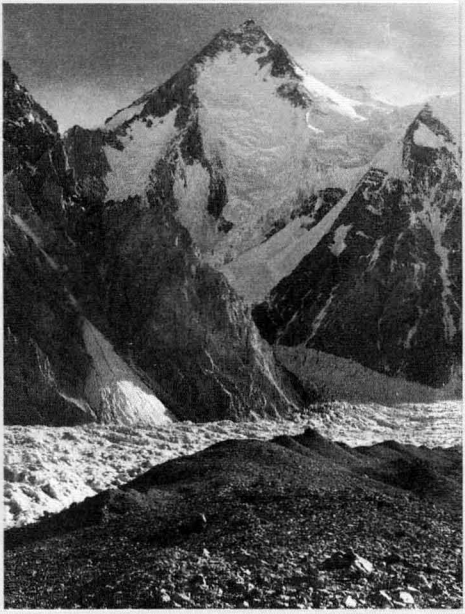
84. Piz Palü (L) and Bellavista pass. (C A Russell) (p 215, p 135)



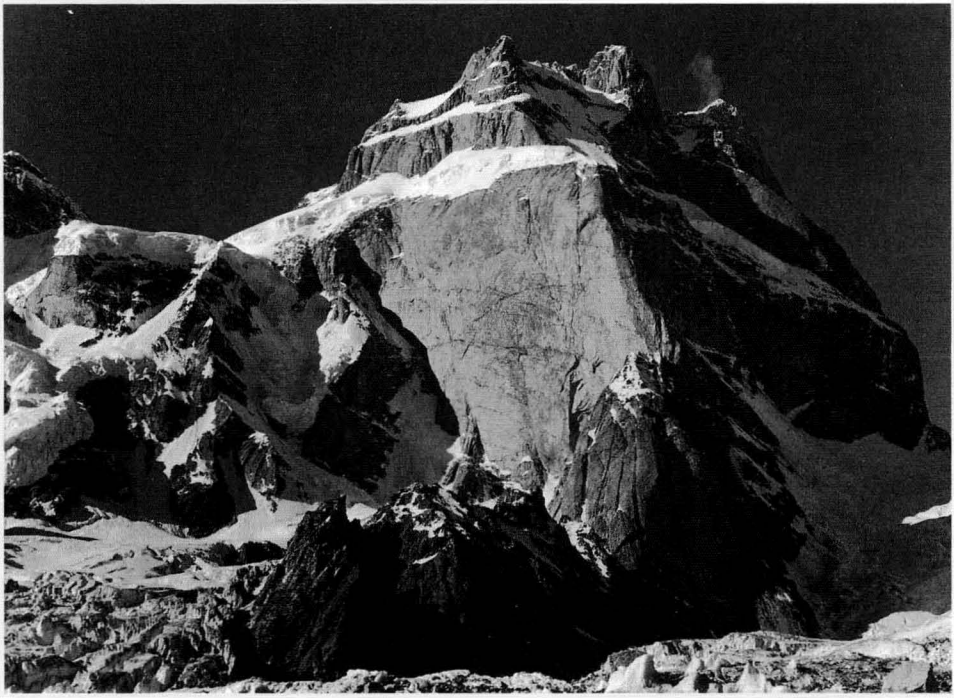
85. Grand Combin, with (upper R) SE ridge. (C A Russell) (p 215)



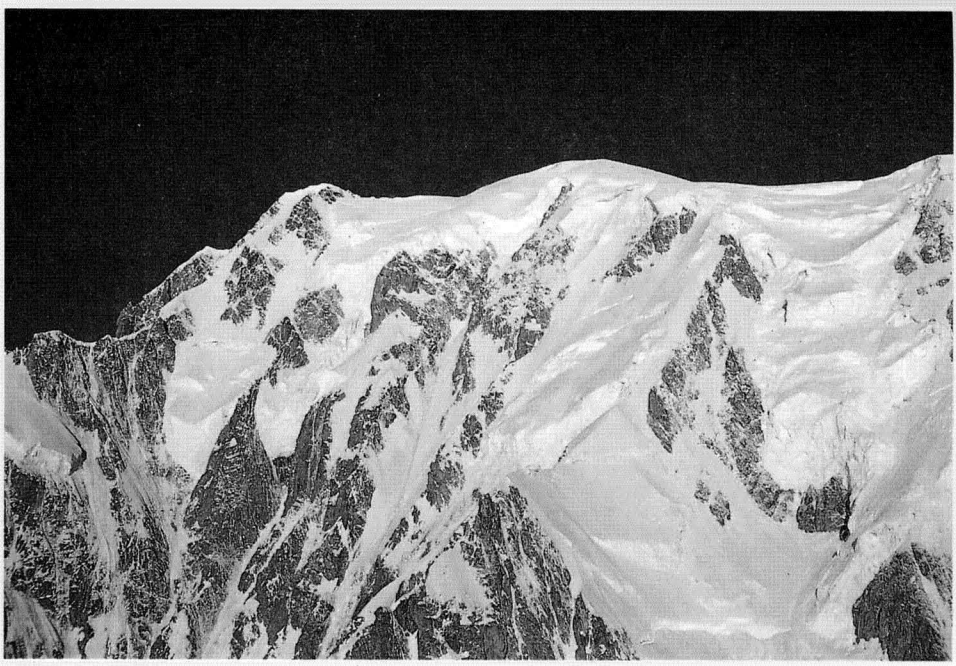
86. Pillar Rock from the east with (R) N face. (C Douglas Milner) (p 215)



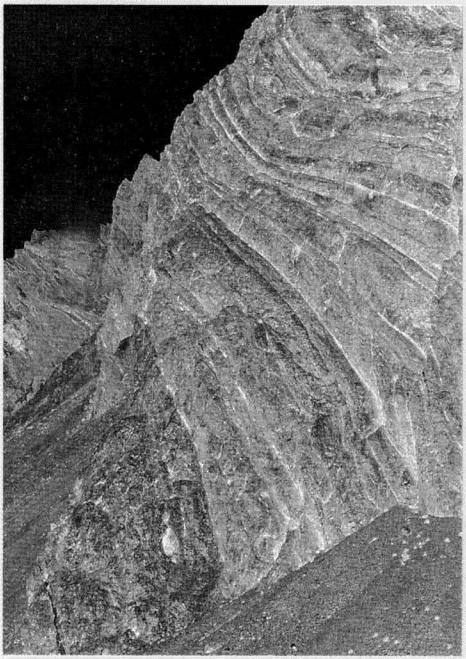
87. Gasherbrum I from the Duke of Abruzzi glacier. (Paul Nunn) (p 239)



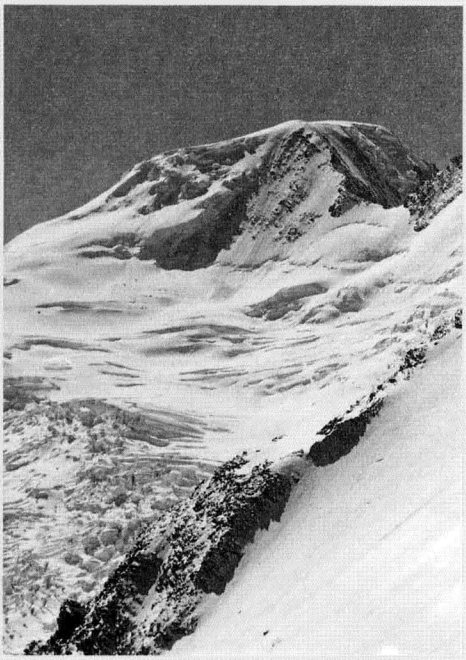
88. Baintha Brakk (The Ogre, 7285m). (Paul Nunn) (p 239)



81. Mont Blanc Brenva Face, July 1977. (Ted Maden) (p 182)



82. 'Folding and Crumpling': Zanskar Himalaya, July 1988. (Ted Maden) (p 182)



83. Alphubel NE face (L) and N ridge. (C A Russell) (p 215)