Baltoro Revisited

ANDRÉ ROCH

(*Plate 33*)

In 1934, at the age of 28, André Roch spent six months on an expedition to the Baltoro glacier as a member of Professor G O Dyhrenfurth's international team. With Hans Ertl of Germany he was the first to explore the SW side of Gasherbrum I by which the mountain was eventually climbed 24 years later. The expedition also reached the Conway Saddle and climbed Sia Kangri and the SE summit of Baltoro Kangri. Over half a century later André Roch revisited the same region.

I first visited Concordia on the Baltoro glacier 56 years ago, with an expedition to the Karakoram in 1934, and I had the good luck to return there in 1990 at the age of 84.

The Karakoram range in northern Pakistan covers an area larger than the whole of Switzerland and contains over 2000 glaciers, five of which (Batura, Hispar, Biafo, Baltoro and Siachen) are over 50km long. In 1934, with my climbing partner Jimmy Belaieff, I took part in Professor Dhyrenfurth's expedition to the Baltoro glacier, hoping to climb Gasherbrum I ('Hidden Peak', 8068m); but the attempt was abandoned when our porters refused to carry loads up a long, steep spur. (This was the route used in 1958 when the Americans, Andy Kauffman and Pete Schoening, with Nick Clinch as expedition leader, made the first ascent.) Having failed on Hidden Peak we set up camp on Conway Saddle; from there the expedition climbed Sia Kangri (7422m, then called 'Queen Mary Peak') and the SE summit (7275m) of the Baltoro Kangri group ('Golden Throne'). Jimmy Belaieff, Piero Ghiglione and I skied down from over 7000m.

At that time the only peak which had already been climbed in the area was the 'Pioneer', a spur of Baltoro Kangri, by members of Sir Martin Conway's 1892 expedition. The Duke of Abruzzi led an important scientific expedition there in 1909, when Federico Negrotto mapped the area with photogrammetry and Vittorio Sella harvested a unique collection of photographs. But, despite numerous attempts with the best guides of Courmayeur, they were beaten by bad weather and did not succeed in reaching any of the many summits they attempted.

The Baltoro glacier is crowned by some of the world's highest mountains, four of them over 8000m: K2, Broad Peak, Gasherbrum I and Gasherbrum II; two over 7900m: Gasherbrum III and IV; and one over 7800m: Masherbrum – the most elegant mountain of all in this majestic circle of high peaks. There are also dozens of mountains over 7000m, and even more over 6000m.

My opportunity to return to this magnificent region arose through the kindness of Isobel Shaw, an Irish lady living in Geneva. When I was president of the Geneva section of the Swiss Alpine Club, I had the pleasure of welcoming Isobel as a member. She has written several excellent tourist guides to Pakistan[1] and is currently working on a trekking guide to northern Pakistan – an almost superhuman task, but one which, with her deep love of the country, she seems to have well under control. During her many trips she had trekked the Biafo and Hispar glaciers but had not yet explored the Baltoro; she was planning this for 1990. If I could only join her I would have the chance to relive my 1934 expedition and revel again in the beauty of those glorious mountains. Isobel was used to organising this kind of trip and could speak the local language. But would she take me? After some hesitation because of my age, she eventually agreed to let me accompany her.

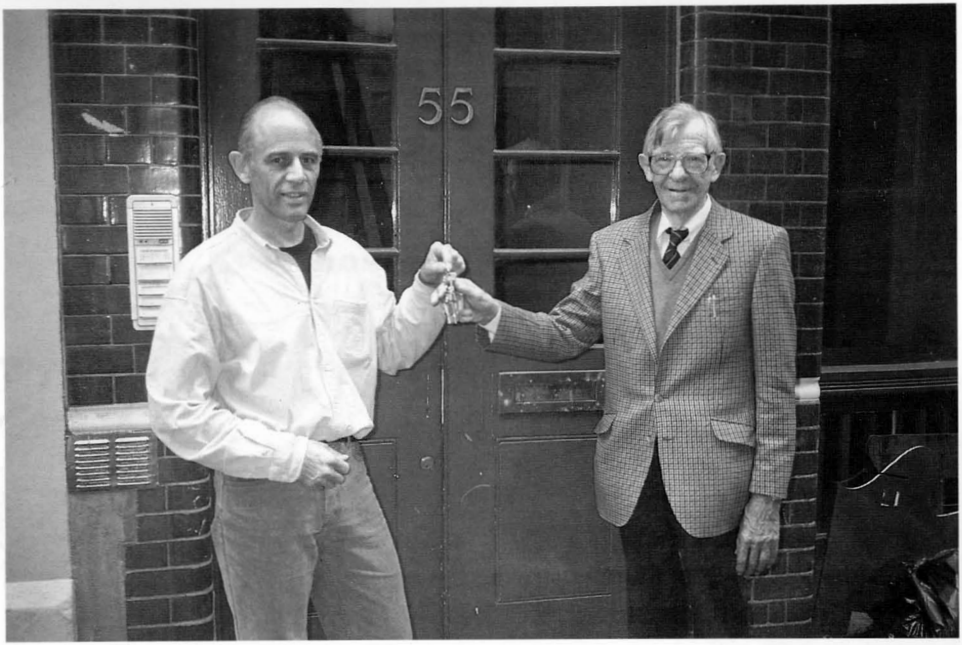
I had ambitious plans. I wanted to trek 120km up to Concordia at 4700m, where five glaciers meet to form the Baltoro. I wanted to do some painting, make a film, take photographs and measure the glacier's flow and profile, so that later measurements could show the variations in the ice. I wanted to carry out the sort of studies I had made at home in Switzerland, in the Himalaya and in the Canadian Yukon. But I seemed to lack the energy to carry out these plans. Though I never actually suffered from mountain sickness, I think it was the altitude, together with my advanced age, which defeated me.

In spite of these handicaps, I was able to re-experience the close companionship of life in camp. Firstly there was Isobel herself, an efficient organiser and attentive to my every need. Next, her son, 21-year-old Benedict, an aeronautical engineering student, intelligent and helpful, who managed to capture for me on film the wild beauty of these mountains. Then there was Elisabeth Gardner, a Swiss lady from Fribourg, who organised the food and often kindly brought me my meals in my tent. Her congratulatory cries would haunt me as I struggled into camp a couple of hours behind the others, quite done in by the day's efforts. One day I lost patience: 'Can't you stop that theatrical performance,' I shouted at her, 'I'm sick of being cheered like that. I'm not a hero, and never have been!' Since her efforts were intended to please, she was taken aback by my reaction and burst into tears. After that, though she continued to be helpful and obliging, I was spared unwanted compliments.

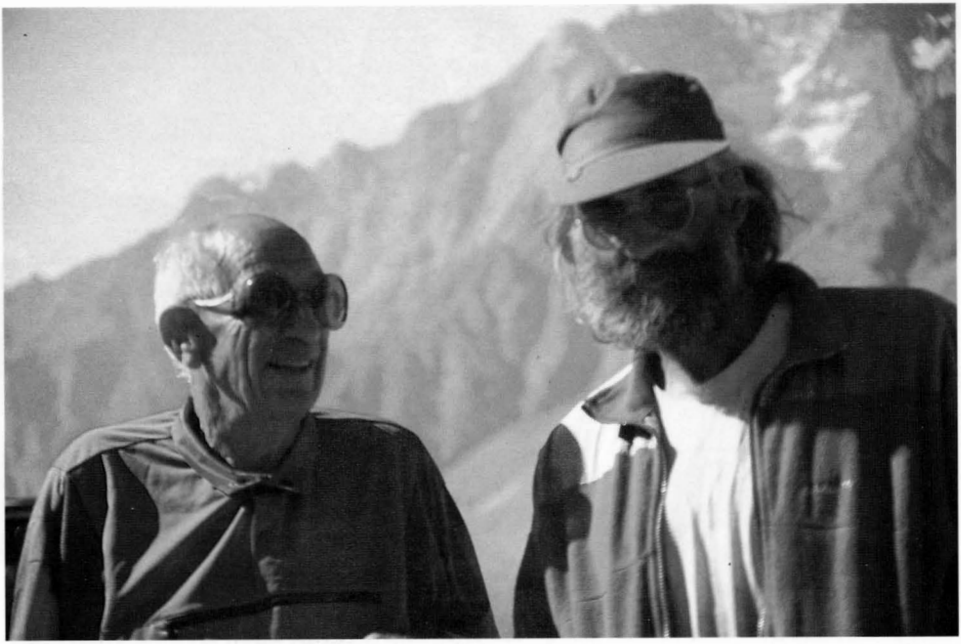
The other two members of the party were our kindly Dr John Shephard, and his charming wife Debbie who had misgivings about joining the expedition until she heard that one of the other members was an octogenarian. I was grateful to both of them for their constant encouragement, and it was reassuring for me to find out that the doctor's pulse was always more rapid than mine!

During the trip we had some entertaining encounters. For instance, we met the elegant French climber Catherine Destivelle who was about to be filmed doing a free climb of Nameless Tower in the Trango group. I was so filled with admiration for her that I wanted to kiss her! Then, at a dinner with the British Naval Attaché, we met Adrian Burgess, a shaggy bear of a man and a veteran of both Everest and K2, who entertained me with tales of his adventures.

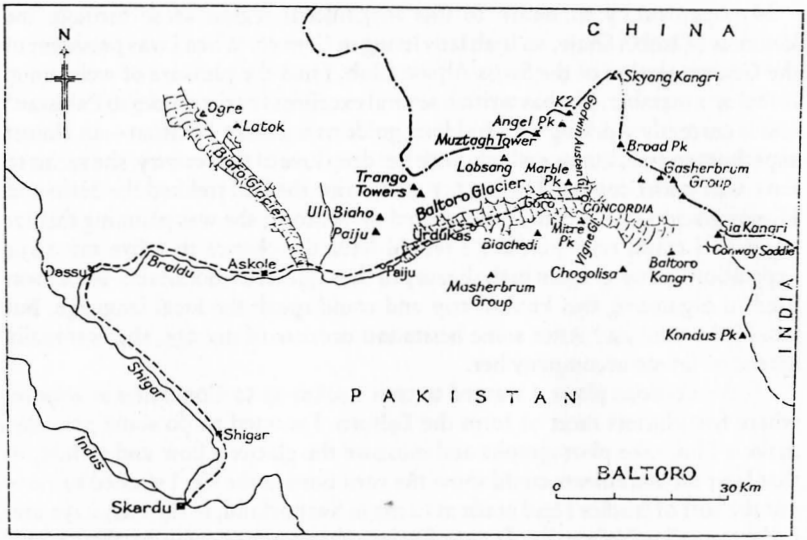
A flight of under an hour carried us from Islamabad to Skardu. In 1934 it had taken us three weeks to reach Skardu with 450 porters, by pony from Srinagar,



32. 23 May 1991: Bob Lawford (R) receives the keys of 55 Charlotte Road from the previous owner, Robert Hanson. (*George Band*) (p179)



33. André Roch and Doug Scott. (*Isobel Shaw*) (p144)



via the Zoji La, Dras and Kargil. That route is no longer open because of the disputed border between India and Pakistan. At Skardu we stayed at the K2 Hotel with its splendid view of the Indus. This mighty river rises some 1000km to the east in Tibet; its murky waters roll on for another 2000km southwards before flowing into the Arabian Sea. We crossed the Indus by jeep, over a suspension bridge supported by steel cables, and drove up the Shigar valley to Apaligon. On my previous visit in 1934 we made the crossing on a wooden ferry which transported men, loads, horses and cattle.

Two days' walking took us to Askole, the last village before the glacier. The country here is a mountain desert except for small patches of land irrigated by glacier water, giving rise to luxuriant vegetation. Askole is a lush green oasis of cultivation. On the way we met the village headman Haji Mehdi. When I told him about our 1934 expedition he said that I must have met his father Haji Fawzil, and he immediately embraced me – a touching gesture.

Our first major obstacle was the crossing of the snout of the Biafo glacier, completely covered with huge boulders that had ridden down from the wild peaks at its source, such as Baintha Brakk (the 'Ogre', 7285m), first climbed by Scott and Bonington in 1977. Here we had a chance encounter with Doug Scott, one of the most interesting personalities amongst British climbers – a large strapping fellow, his face almost hidden by his long hair and beard. His party was returning from an attempt on one of the Latok peaks. His lack of success this year worried him less than the loss of one of his porters who slipped from a cliff face into the boiling waters of the river Braldu. His body was never found, but his stick could be seen caught in a clump of sagebrush just above the water line.

After seven days we reached the snout of the Baltoro glacier, an impressive desert of stones on ice stretching for over 60km, past Concordia, to its source.

From now on, every step was a struggle. I had three porters just to tow me along and prevent me from falling. Two supported my arms whilst the third carried our load, including a folding chair intended as a carrying chair – just in case it should be needed. I should mention here that I have an artificial hip, resulting from a car accident, which upsets my sense of balance on rocky moraine. Sometimes I joked and pretended that 'they' had deliberately scattered all these stones across my path, but I could always find a large boulder to sit on, to rest and admire this harsh wilderness. Isobel never deserted me – she forced me to drink and took photos of me which gave me the excuse to stop and get my breath back. I felt ashamed that I was unable to move as quickly and easily as the others.

I had not undertaken this adventure to meet any kind of personal challenge. I did not need to achieve any special feat in order to appreciate the peaks shining brilliantly through the shifting cloud patterns in the dazzling sunlight. Yet here I was in the centre of a world of high peaks draped with hanging glaciers and with rock faces too steep to hold any ice or snow. As I found myself once again in the strange, savage world of these remote mountains, many details and re-collections of my first visit came rushing back into my mind. I was able to identify every peak, every glacier; yet the sight of these gigantic cathedrals now filled me with terror – a fear that I had never experienced before on any of my earlier expeditions.

The campsite at Paiju was sheltered by willows. A tiny stream trickled through dirty abandoned camps and burnt-out fires. Here many expeditions take a rest day. The camp was crowded and the porters entertained themselves with contests, singing and dancing all night long to the beat of their drums. During the course of the 1990 season, 52 expeditions were scheduled to visit the Baltoro glacier. Finding ourselves in the centre of it all, it was interesting to watch the constant movement of trekkers, climbers, Pakistani soldiers, and hordes of accompanying porters. The Pakistani army has to defend these mountains against attack from India – it is a real war. The present battlefront, the highest in the world, is on Conway Saddle at almost 6000m. The Pakistani supply line extends for 120km, 60 of them along the glacier. The soldiers that we came across appeared to be sympathetic and friendly. It seems a senseless confrontation.

At Urdukas we camped below enormous boulders, close to a party of Swedish climbers attempting the Muztagh Tower – that giant monolith made famous by Vittorio Sella's impressive photograph taken in 1909. One of the Swedish climbers hoped to descend by paraglider from the summit of the tower. I admire the audacity of today's climbers! Seeing that I was painting, he asked if I could paint him a picture of Muztagh. Then he told me a traumatic story. Two yaks used as pack animals by the army had fallen into a crevasse just below Urdukas. One had slipped down too deep to be reached, whilst the other was visible and bellowing but beyond hope of rescue. The Swedish climber had lowered himself into the crevasse and had killed the beast with his ice-axe. I confessed that I wouldn't have any idea how to kill a yak with an ice-axe!

From my tent at Urdukas I looked down the glacier to the serrated granite towers of the Trango group. On the flank I could see the Nameless Tower

(6239m) where in 1987 the Geneva climbers Michel Piola and Stéphane Schaffter with P Delale and M Fauquet opened up a sensational route on the W face. In 1988 E Loretan and W Kurtyka climbed a route no less sensational on the E face. The first ascent, by the SW face, had been made in 1976 by four British climbers: Joe Brown, Martin Boysen, Mo Anthoine and Malcolm Howells.

At our next campsite, on the glacier at Goro I, we rose to a glorious dawn. Masherbrum (7821m) surged out of the clouds as the sun rose. We tried to capture on film the swiftly changing light and shadow on its magnificent pointed summit. I remembered that in 1934 Yarmila Marton, a beautiful and gentle American film actress, accompanied us up the glacier followed by a young boy carrying a basket containing a flower in a pot. His duty consisted in watering the flower.

At Goro II, our last stage before Concordia, the three ladies of our party were invited by a Chilean expedition into their mess tent where they sang and danced (somewhat breathlessly at 4500m!) for the best part of the night. The next day Isobel visited an international party returning from Gasherbrum II. They had been in dense cloud on their summit climb. The Polish member estimated that their highest point had been only 100m below the top, the German thought that it could not have been more than 50m short, whilst the optimistic American judged that they had finished only 15m from the summit!

On 12 July, in the late afternoon, we arrived at Concordia, a huge ice plateau covered with boulders. We set up our tents at the foot of the rugged double-headed Mitre Peak whose savage rock walls rose 1300m above our camp. To the north, the silhouette of the long SE ridge of K2 (the Abruzzi ridge by which K2 was first climbed) jutted through the clouds over the shoulder of Marble Peak. Viewed from a little further east, K2 (8611m), the second highest summit in the world, appeared in all its glory, framed between its dark, steep-sided neighbours. How can one describe a mountain of such grandeur? Rising a noble 3600m above the Godwin Austen glacier, it forms a near-perfect pyramid, covered in hanging glaciers and gleaming under the shifting patterns of light and shadow.

After three bold American attempts on K2, it was two Italians, Achille Compagnoni and Lino Lacedelli, who made the first ascent in 1954. Seven different routes have since been climbed, not counting variations. In 1979 a heavyweight French expedition, with 1400 porters, made a first attempt on the SW ridge. Some of France's leading alpinists were in the team, including Ivan Ghirardini, Yannick Seigneur and Pierre Beghin. After covering the mountain with fixed ropes, D Monaci and T Leroy finally abandoned their summit attempt at 8450m, in extreme weather, only 160m from the top. Ghirardini returned the following year with his wife, a liaison officer and a few porters, hoping to use all the fixed ropes from the year before. As a training climb he made a dangerous solo first ascent of the Mitre; but again he was defeated on K2 by bad weather. On returning to Base Camp he discovered that the liaison officer had tried to take advantage of his wife. He was so furious that he wanted to kill the man, but was fortunately restrained from doing so by an American party camped nearby.

As an American we met said: 'The trek to Concordia is a killer, but once you get there it's worth the price.' We camped on an open sea of rock and ice that stretched for miles, hemmed in by towering walls. The scale of everything was immense. Looking back down to the west, the peaks of Piaju, Chorico and the soaring spire of Uli Biaho filled the horizon. Next, along the N side of the Baltoro glacier, the Trango Towers, Cathedral Peaks, Lobsang and Muztagh formed a vast wall up to Concordia, each group separated by tributary glaciers. Round the end of this wall we looked due north up the Godwin Austen glacier to K2, which blocks the way to China. To its left stood the pure white pyramid of Angel Peak, while the huge mass of Broad Peak rose to the north-east, guarded by immense buttresses of red-brown rock.

Due east of Concordia, Gasherbrum IV dominated the camp. This difficult peak was first climbed in 1958 by Walter Bonatti and Carlo Mauri. In 1985, Voytek Kurtyka and Robert Schauer made an astonishingly daring route directly up its W face, which we could now see towering above us. It took them five days to reach the shoulder and three more to descend the other side. For five days they had nothing to eat or drink, but they survived without permanent ill effects. Later, when we returned to Skardu, we met Robert Schauer and I was able to congratulate him. Robert runs a highly successful Alpine Film Festival at his native town of Graz in Austria. He invited me to the next festival and filmed me painting on the shore of Lake Satpara above Skardu.

To continue with the panorama seen from Concordia – to the right of our camp, to the south-east, the nearest summits were those of Gasherbrum V and VI, two 7000m peaks dwarfed by their taller neighbour Gasherbrum IV (7980m). To the south stood the Baltoro Kangri group comprising five summits between 7200m and 7300m, baptised the 'Golden Throne' by Conway in 1892. Isobel pointed out that these do indeed resemble a giant's throne gilded by the rising sun – something I had not thought of in 1934. To the south also rose Kondus Peak and Chogolisa (7665m), where Hermann Buhl met his death when he fell through a cornice in deep mist. To complete the circle, a long line of steep-sided mountains rose above the Vigne glacier; and finally there was the peak of Biarchedi (6787m), blocking the view of Masherbrum.

Our first day at Concordia was dedicated to rest and laundry, which Isobel hung out to dry on the army's telephone line to the Conway Saddle. I tried to paint Broad Peak but I started too late in the day and the sun was too high, giving no shadows. The following day, while I rested in camp, the others moved up the Godwin Austen glacier to K2 Base Camp to see how an American team were progressing with their attempt on the Abruzzi ridge. Isobel returned the same evening, accompanied by one of my porters, having travelled about 9km each way. On the return journey they got lost among the crevasses and were forced to leap a number of fierce torrents flowing through the glacier ice. These are extremely dangerous and a slip would have been fatal.

I had hoped that a couple of days' rest would do me some good, but as we began our return journey down the glacier I began to feel more exhausted than when climbing Everest in 1952. I could just manage the descents but any uphill climb left me breathless. I was forced to stop every ten minutes to lean on a boulder and although I could still admire the mountains my state of exhaustion

depressed me. By the second day of the return journey I had reached my limit. Descending an ice slope I slipped for about eight metres and fell, jolting my artificial hip. Everyone, including the doctor, thought I ought to be flown out by helicopter, but the final decision was left to me. In spite of my fall I was not in any pain and was still able to walk. But I did not realise how much I had deteriorated; I did not even have enough energy to wash! I felt ashamed to be carried down, but I knew that I must be realistic. Some people might think 'Whatever was he doing there anyway?' But no one could take away from me my joy at seeing those mountains again. The next morning I decided to summon the helicopter.

Isobel left with a porter for the army post at the edge of the glacier in order to request a rescue helicopter. I was placed on an army stretcher which required frequent adjustment. Fortunately I had with me a supply of nylon line which came in very useful. But the porters tied it round me in such a way that I was afraid of breaking my legs if the stretcher should tip over. We rose and dipped among the stones and ice; the side supports dug into me and I was constantly afraid that the stretcher would collapse. At last, after two hours, we reached a flat sandy area at the side of the glacier, where there were people, tents, and even an army doctor who came out to ask how I was. But our own doctor, John Shephard, wishing to keep me under his eye, was constantly by my side.

Within two hours the helicopter arrived. I was placed behind the three front seats containing the two pilots and Isobel. Seated on my rolled-up sleeping-bag, I was able to enjoy this speedy trip back. We skimmed, boulder-hopping, down the monstrous glacier. Lower down, along the river, we could see people on the track. Then we ran into a sandstorm and quickly turned up a side valley to land and shelter. After another two hours the wind dropped and we were able to fly on to Skardu where a jeep was waiting to take me to the hotel. At last I could relax, and I soon began to feel better.

After a few days' rest Isobel took me in a jeep from Skardu to Gilgit, and thence on to Hunza. At the hotel there we were both smitten by an attack of salmonella poisoning. My resistance was low, and this signalled the end of my adventure. The flight from Islamabad to Frankfurt felt like the height of luxury. I reached Geneva at the very moment that my daughter Claudine was locking up my house to return to her own home in the Auvergne. She kindly stayed on for a few days and my strength quickly returned. Thanks to Isobel, I can now look back on a wonderful adventure.

REFERENCES

1 Isobel Shaw, *Pakistan Handbook*. London, John Murray, 1989. French translation (abridged version): *Pakistan*. Geneva, Guides Olizane, 1990.