One Hundred Years Ago

(*with extracts from the* Alpine Journal)

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(*Plates 80, 81*)

The early months of 1892 were notable for the exceptionally mild weather which prevailed in most parts of the Alps and many winter excursions were completed. On 21 January Henri Dunod, with Frédéric Payot and the brothers François and Gaspard Simond, reached the summit of Mont Blanc where he inspected the small wooden cabin which had been erected at the request of Dr Jules Janssen, the astronomer.

> The group of Parisian scientists, led by M. Janssen and including Prince Roland Bonaparte, are making preparations to realise their ambitious scheme of building an observatory on the summit of Mont Blanc. The operations last year were principally confined to tunnelling through the snow just below the summit, with the object of discovering whether rock existed for a foundation. No such rock was found, and M. Janssen has now resolved to build the observatory in the frozen snow which covers the summit of the mountain. With a view to ascertaining whether this surface snow was sufficiently solid for the purpose and whether any movement or displacement would be likely to occur after the construction of the observatory, a wooden cabin was erected on the proposed site at the end of last summer. This was visited in the month of January and again early in the spring, but it was found that no movement whatever had occurred, and that the cabin had sustained no material damage. The promoters are therefore encouraged to build the observatory upon a similar foundation, and are convinced that the construction planned will resist all the elements, even at that altitude.

The cold unsettled weather which affected most regions during the early part of the summer was followed by a gradual improvement and the conditions experienced during the climbing season were considerably better than those of the previous year.

> The climbing centre in which most work has been done by mountaineers is undoubtedly Chamonix. Possibly this was from the desire of Englishmen to avoid the noisy surroundings of the railway stations at Zermatt and Grindelwald. At all events climbers seem at last to have admitted the claims of the

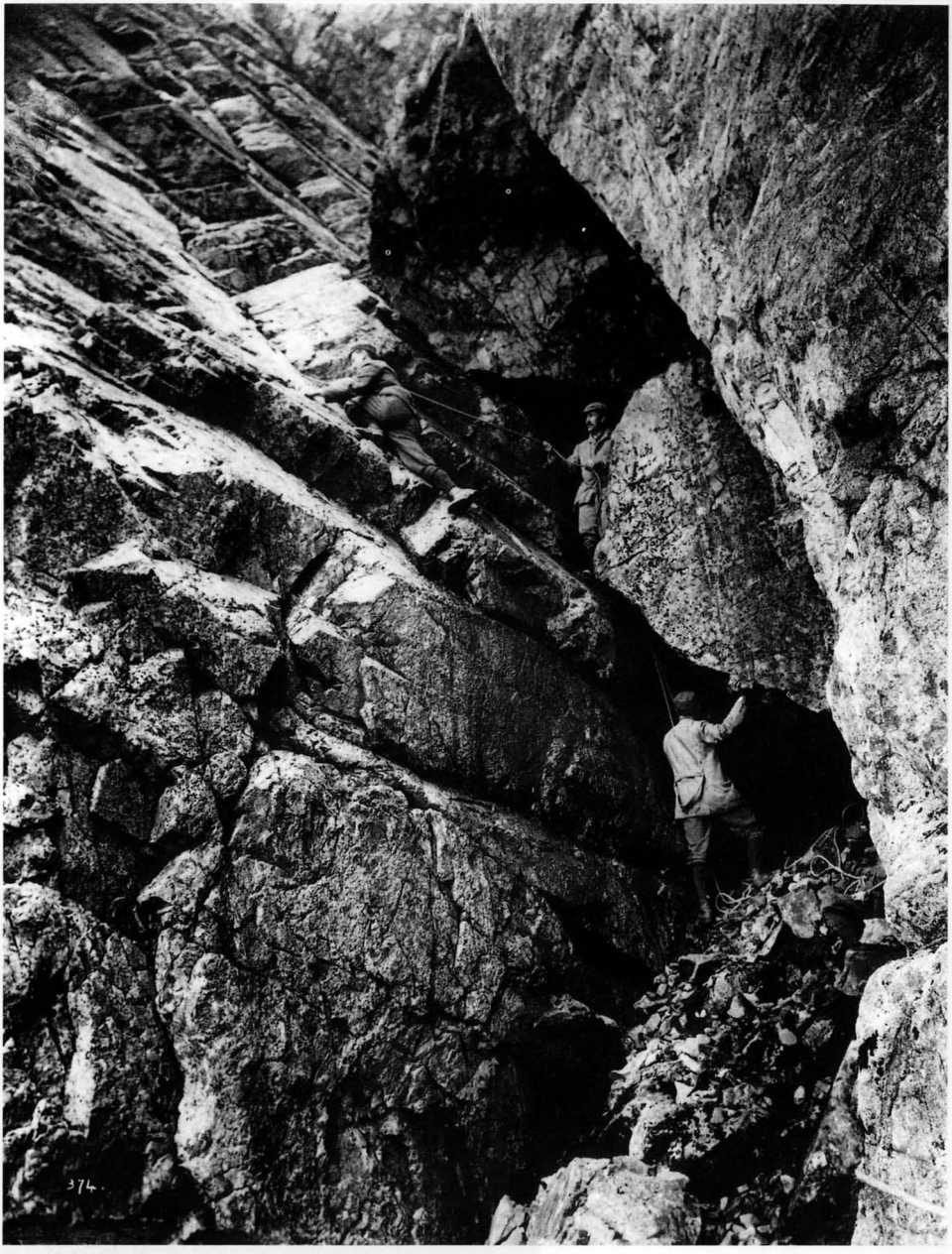
> Montanvert to be one of the best, if not *the* best, starting point in the Alps for difficult rock climbs; and the little hotel which till now could seldom boast of a 'house-party' of more than eight or ten was completely over-crowded by members on the 'active list' of the Alpine Club. Another remarkable change was the absence of guides; and it is a significant fact in the annals of mountaineering that with hardly a single exception all the most notable expeditions in the district were done this year without the assistance of guides.

The visitors, amongst whom were some of the finest amateur climbers of the day, were not slow to take advantage of their surroundings. On 29 July J H Gibson, G H Morse and J H Wicks reached the summit of the Aiguille de Talèfre by way of the Talèfre glacier and the unclimbed upper section of the W ridge. The first ascent of L'Evêque, on the ridge between the Aiguille Verte and the Aiguille du Moine, was completed on 7 August by C H Pasteur, his sisters Isabel and Mary Pasteur and Ellis Carr. The other member of this party was Claude Wilson who on the following day with Gibson, Morse and Pasteur made the first guideless ascent of the Aiguille du Grépon, reaching the summit and descending by way of the SSW ridge.

Another visitor was A F Mummery who later wrote[1] that he was without guides, having 'learnt the great truth that those who wish really to enjoy the pleasures of mountaineering must roam the upper snows trusting exclusively to their own skill and knowledge.' On 13 August Mummery, Carr and W C Slingsby began an attempt to force a route up the steep N face of the Aiguille du Plan. After many hours of difficult work on exposed slopes the party bivouacked on a small patch of rocks. In his paper 'Two Days on an Ice Slope' read before the Alpine Club in the following year Carr recalled that

> the weather fortunately remained perfect, and the moon had risen, though hidden from us by our mountain. Immediately below lay Chamonix, like a cheap illumination, gradually growing more patchy as the night advanced and the candles went out one by one, while above the stars looked down as if silently wondering why in the world we were sitting there. Packed as we were, we were unable to indulge in those exercises generally adopted to induce warmth, and we shivered so vigorously at intervals that, when all vibrating in unison, we wondered how it might affect the stability of our perch. Sudden cramp in a leg, too, could only be relieved by concerted action, it being necessary for the whole party to rise solemnly together like a bench of judges, while the limb was stretched out over the valley of Chamonix till the pain abated and it could be folded up and packed away once more.

On the following day, faced with increasing difficulties at a height of 3450m, the party decided to abandon the attempt and succeeded in descending by the same route with Mummery, who had led during the greater part of the ascent, bringing up the rear.



80. The Collie Step, Moss Ghyll, Scafell. (*G P Abraham*) (*Alpine Club Library Collection*) (p238)

Four days later, on 18 August, Mummery, Pasteur, Geoffrey Hastings and J N Collie completed the first traverse of the Grépon reaching the summit by way of the N ridge and descending the SSW ridge. Mummery later recalled[1] how at an early hour he had received 'the unpleasant intelligence that the very name of Grépon had so frightened the porters that they had surreptitiously left their beds and fled to Chamonix.' Other porters were then engaged, one of whom

> indulged in some very depressing statements. He told us that he had recently been up the Charmoz, and with true prophetic insight had devoted his time whilst there to an examination of the particular slab up which our route lay. This slab, he had been able to see, was coated with *verglas* and most ingenious defences of snow, rock, and ice had been skilfully erected at the top; in short, it was simply courting defeat to go on with our attempt.

Undaunted the party proceeded but on reaching the start of the climb the man gave further details.

> This very slab had, it appeared, fallen, crashing down to the glacier several years since, leaving a blank, unbroken wall that could by no manner of means be ascended. We were struck dumb by this accumulation of difficulties; not only was the slab impassable by reason of the accumulated ice, but it was not even there!

Fortunately these pronouncements did not affect the climb, during which Mummery successfully led the ascent of his eponymous crack and recovered an ice-axe left by the other party.

Both climbs on the Grépon were fine achievements and the attempt to scale the N face of the Plan – a formidable route of unrelenting steepness – was an outstanding exploit, far in advance of its time.

Other successful expeditions in the locality were the fourth ascent of the Brenva ridge route on Mont Blanc by Paul Güssfeldt, with Emile Rey, Laurent Croux and Michel Savoye on 16 August despite the loss of Güssfeldt's axe in the dangerous couloir which bears his name; and the first traverse of the Aiguilles Dorées, the chain of rock peaks above the Trient plateau, on 30 August by the guideless party of V A Fynn and W J Murphy. On 15 August in the Bernese Oberland Fynn and Murphy had completed another fine climb: the first ascent of the upper section of the SW ridge of the Finsteraarhorn, the ridge which is crossed by the normal route from the Finsteraarhorn hut to the Hugisattel.

Many other parties were able to take advantage of the favourable conditions. In the Dauphiné two peaks were climbed for the first time: the Pic du Coup de Sabre or Petit Pic Sans Nom on 12 July by Alfred Holmes with Jean-Baptiste and Hippolyte Rodier, and the Barre Noire, above the Brèche des Ecrins, by H A Beeching and P A L Pryor with Clemenz Zurbriggen on 25 July. Other peaks ascended for the first time were the Torre di San Orso in the Graian Alps by George Yeld and E T Compton with François Pession, André Pelissier and

Léon Guichardaz on 5 August and Punta Margherita, the highest point of the Grandes Murailles in the Pennine Alps, on 22 August by Evan Mackenzie with Antonio and Daniel Maquignaz. Elsewhere in the Pennine Alps F W Oliver, with Pierre Maître and Antoine Georges, completed two fine new routes: the SW, Douves Blanches ridge in the Grandes Dents chain above the Arolla valley on 1 September and the NE ridge of the Ruinette on 15 September. In the Zermatt district on 28 September J P Farrar, with Daniel Maquignaz, forced a route up the unclimbed S face of the Ober Gabelhorn.

In the Bregaglia group Anton von Rydzewski, with Christian Klucker and Mansueto Barbaria, continued his exploration of the remaining unclimbed peaks above the Forno glacier, reaching the summit of Punta Rasica on 27 June and making the first ascent of Cima di Vazzeda two days later. On 11 July Klucker, one of the greatest guides of the period, investigated the N ridge of Piz Badile on his own, reaching a height of more than 3000m.

Further east, in the Bernina Alps the first ascent of the ENE ridge of Piz Roseg, the ridge above the Porta da Roseg, was completed by E J Garwood and C C Branch with Martin Schocher and Christian Zippert on 15 August. Later in the year Piz Roseg was climbed in winter, the summit being reached on 28 December by A Swaine with Klucker in fine but very cold weather.

In the Dolomites a remarkable achievement was the first ascent, on 16 July, of the Torre Stabeler, one of the Vajolet towers, by the guide Johann Niederwieser-Stabeler accompanied by Hans Helversen.

The only party to visit the Caucasus was that of Gottfried Merzbacher who in the previous year had climbed in the central region with Ludwig Purtscheller. After various difficulties had prevented him from returning to that region Merzbacher, accompanied by the guides Johann Windisch and Heinrich Moser, explored several districts at the eastern end of the range and climbed a number of the higher peaks, including Tebulos-mta (4493m) on 25 August, Komito-tau (4272m) on 30 August and, on 11 September, Diklos-mta (4285m).

The principal undertaking of the year was W M Conway's expedition to the Karakoram. The party, which arrived at Gilgit on 5 May, included the Hon C G Bruce, J H Roudebush, the artist A D McCormick, Oscar Eckenstein who left the expedition at the end of July, the guide Mattias Zurbriggen of Macugnaga and four men from Bruce's regiment, the 5th Gurkha Rifles. Although the weather was far from ideal Conway was able to explore and survey the Hispar and Biafo glaciers, making the first recorded crossing of the Hispar Pass (5151m) on 18 July. He then explored a large part of the Baltoro glacier and named several peaks, including Broad Peak (8047m).

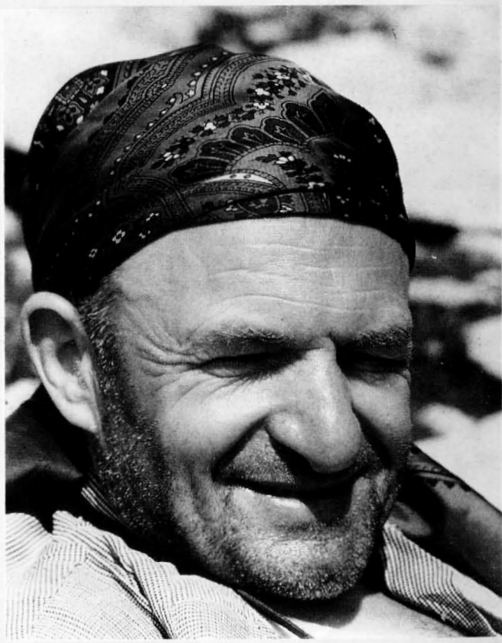
After climbing a peak of about 5900m on 10 August Conway, Bruce and Zurbriggen, accompanied by two of the Gurkhas, reached the summit of Pioneer Peak (6970m) on 25 August while attempting to climb the Golden Throne or Baltoro Kangri (7274m). Conway later recalled[2] that

> the moment we looked round we saw that the peak we were on was the highest point of our ridge. Beyond it was a deep depression, on the other side of which a long face of snow led up to the south ridge of the Golden Throne. We remained on the top till nearly four



81. *On the top of Pioneer Peak*, sketch by A D McCormick. (From *Climbing and Exploration in the Karakoram-Himalayas* by W M Conway, 1894.) (p238)

82. Peter Wild, 1912–1991, Bregaglia 1962. (*Frank Solari*) (p328)



> o'clock, for it was hard to give over repose, and harder still to tear ourselves away from a scene so magnificent and so rare. The southward vistas, which were wholly new to us, of course chiefly arrested our attention on the moment of arrival on the summit, but it was westwards, down the valley we had mounted, and far far away to the north-west that the vastest area was displayed to our wondering gaze. Away the eye wandered to the infinite distance, behind the mountains of Hunza, possibly as far as the remote Pamir. This incomparable view was before us during all our descent, with the evening lights waxing in brilliancy upon it, and the veil of air becoming warmer over it. The high clouds that overhung it became golden as the sun went down, and every grade of pearly mystery, changing from moment to moment, enwrapped the marshalled mountain ranges that form the piled centre of Asia and send their waters to the remotest seas.

Conway's expedition, which was supported by the Royal Society, the Royal Geographical Society and the British Association and was the first major undertaking of its kind, was of considerable importance. By reaching the greatest height then attained[3] Conway focused attention on the region and through his detailed record of every aspect of the journey made a valuable contribution to the knowledge of the time.

Later in the year George Cockerill, an officer attached to the Kashmir Regiment, explored a large area in the western Karakoram. Starting from a base in the Hunza valley on 2 November Cockerill reached a point near the Shimshal Pass, discovering a number of glaciers and sighting the peak Distaghil Sar (7885m).

In the far north a distance of some 2200km was covered by Robert Peary, the American polar explorer, who in his search for a land route to the North Pole succeeded in crossing the northern end of the Greenland ice cap during the course of a remarkable return journey across the country. Leaving a base near Thule on 15 May with 14 dogs Peary's party reached the opposite coast at latitude 82°N early in July, discovering Independence Fjord and the ice-free region now known as Peary Land.

In Britain rock climbs of increasing difficulty were being completed. In the Lake District on 15 April G A Solly, Slingsby, G P Baker and W A Brigg made the first ascent of Eagle's Nest Ridge on Great Gable, an outstanding feat for the period. At Christmas a famous incident occurred on Scafell when Collie, Hastings and J W Robinson made the first ascent of Moss Ghyll. Collie, who was leading, later described[4] how on reaching a point where it was necessary to traverse out of the ghyll onto steep slabs no satisfactory hold could be found.

> But we were determined not to be beaten. Hastings' ice-axe was next brought into requisition, and what followed I have no doubt will be severely criticised by more orthodox mountaineers than ourselves. As it was my suggestion I must take the blame. *Peccavi! I hacked a step in the rock* – and it was very hard work.

The Collie Step, an early example of the use of an artificial aid, enabled the party to negotiate the slabs and complete this celebrated route. In Scotland John, Edward and Bertram Hopkinson explored the N face of Ben Nevis, ascending Tower Ridge to the foot of the Great Tower on 3 September and, with Charles Hopkinson, descending the whole length of the ridge from the summit plateau on the following day. On 6 September they completed another fine climb: the first ascent of Northeast Buttress.

During the year two well-known clubs were founded. In California the Sierra Club was incorporated on 4 June, electing the great conservationist John Muir as the first president and holding its first general meeting on 16 September. At home the first meeting of the Yorkshire Ramblers' Club was held on 6 October, this name being adopted in preference to 'The Three Peak Club' – a reference to the popular round of Ingleborough, Whernside and Pen-y-Ghent. Slingsby, who succeeded G T Lowe the first president, was an influential member of the Club for many years.

A long awaited event was the publication of Edward Whymper's book *Travels Amongst the Great Andes of the Equator*, the account of his expedition to Ecuador 12 years earlier. This fine work though well received did not have the same popular appeal as his immortal *Scrambles Amongst the Alps*. Another book published during the year which aroused considerable interest was the *Mountaineering* volume in the Badminton Library of Sports and Pastimes edited by C T Dent with illustrations by Carr and H G Willink.

In conclusion it is appropriate to recall in Conway's own words the achievements of his party. 'We spent, in all, 84 days on snow or glacier; we traversed from end to end, for the first time, the three longest known glaciers in the world outside the polar regions; and we climbed to the top of a peak approximately 23,000 feet high.' It was perhaps fitting, exactly four centuries after Antoine de Ville's ascent of Mont Aiguille and Columbus' first voyage of discovery, that an expedition should set out to explore and climb in one of the greatest mountain ranges on earth.

REFERENCES

1 A F Mummery, *My Climbs in the Alps and Caucasus*. London, T Fisher Unwin, 1895.

2 W M Conway, *Climbing and Exploration in the Karakoram-Himalayas*. London, T Fisher Unwin, 1894.

3 W W Graham's claim to have reached the summit of Kabru (7315m) in 1883 has never been recognised.

4 Norman Collie, 'Climbing near Wastdale Head'. *Scottish Mountaineering Club Journal*, Vol III No 13, January 1894.