C A RUSSELL

One Hundred Years Ago

(with extracts from the *Alpine Journal*)

(*Plates 78–82*)

> Truly wonderful has been the weather during the past month. Nights of more or less severe frosts have been continuously succeeded by days in which the sun has shone with almost tropical power in a cloudless blue sky. The only cause for complaint is the want of snow. One foot and a half would probably represent the total fall during the whole of the winter up to the present.
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> The extraordinary absence of snow this winter has tempted many people to make mountain ascents, and in some cases these are as easily accomplished as in summer.

The weather experienced throughout the Alps at the beginning of 1896 was so favourable that during the first week of January alone three of the great peaks – the Eiger, the Finsteraarhorn and Piz Bernina – were climbed by guided parties, each summit being reached for only the second time under winter conditions. In the Bregaglia group on 16 February Mrs Elizabeth Main,[1] accompanied by the guides Martin Schocher and Christian Schnitzler, completed a long and tiring expedition from the Forno hut to make the first winter ascent of Monte della Disgrazia. During the same month two high peaks in the neighbouring Bernina Alps were climbed for the first time in winter: Crast' Agüzza on 6 February by Mrs Main with Schocher and Schnitzler; and Piz Zupo on 19 February by the same party with the addition of Anthony Dod.[2] The favourable conditions were enjoyed as far south as the Maritime Alps where, again, two high peaks were climbed for the first time during the winter season: Cime du Gélas on 11 February and Cima di Nasta on 18 February, both ascents being made by parties which included Victor de Cessole and the guide Jean Plent.

The mild winter was followed by a spring which

> ... has been one of the worst known for years in the matter of weather. For six weeks from the commencement of April it rained (or snowed) almost incessantly and during the past few weeks the weather has been far from settled. As late as the middle of May



78. Christian Almer and his wife Margareta on the occasion of their golden wedding ascent of the Wetterhorn, 22 June 1896. (*Schweizerisches Alpines Museum, Bern*) (p229)

> the fields were perfectly white and this is not surprising when we consider that at a fair estimate fully twenty feet of snow fell. It is only a few days ago that the Flüela Pass was opened the entire way for wheel traffic, and we hear that at the hospiz vast quantities of snow still lie around the road.

Conditions remained unsettled during June and the bad weather 'which rendered the season of 1896 so wretched' continued with little respite throughout the summer. In such circumstances most expeditions were of short duration and many of the new routes which were recorded during the season were undertaken on the lower peaks. In the Dauphiné on 6 July the first ascent of the N ridge of the Pic de Neige Cordier, a noted viewpoint above the Glacier Blanc, was completed by P d'Aiguebelle with Louis Faure. Later in the month, on 25 July, Auguste Reynier and Claude Verne with Maximin and Casimir Gaspard and Joseph Turc reached the summit of Les Bans by way of the unclimbed upper section of the S ridge.

In the Mont Blanc range on 9 July J H Wicks and Claude Wilson with Alfred Simond completed the second ascent[3] of the Dent du Requin after forcing a route up the E face and the NE ridge. On 14 August George Yeld, who at the beginning of the year had succeeded Sir Martin Conway as Editor of the *Alpine Journal*, made the first ascent of the N, higher summit of the Pointe des Papillons, above the Talèfre glacier, accompanied by François and Sylvain Pession. Five days later Yeld and his guides reached the summit of the unclimbed Aiguille de Tronchey, on the SE ridge of the Grandes Jorasses.

In the Pennine Alps two new routes of note were completed in the Arolla district: the NNW ridge of Mont Blanc de Cheilon by Julien Gallet with Antoine Bovier and his son on 20 July; and the SE, Tsarmine ridge of the Petite Dent de Veisivi on 17 August by Francis Aston-Binns and O K Williamson with Jean Maître and a porter. Further along the chain, on 18 September, Gian Domenico Ferrari and Giovanni Corradi reached the highest point of the Portjengrat after making the first ascent of the SE face. A few days earlier, on 10 September, an attempt to ascend the Lyskamm had ended in tragedy when Dr Max Günther and his guides Roman Imboden and Peter Josef Ruppen lost their lives after falling from the E ridge, a route notorious for its dangerous cornices.[4]

Despite a number of difficulties caused by the bad weather considerable progress was made during the summer in connection with a new engineering project.

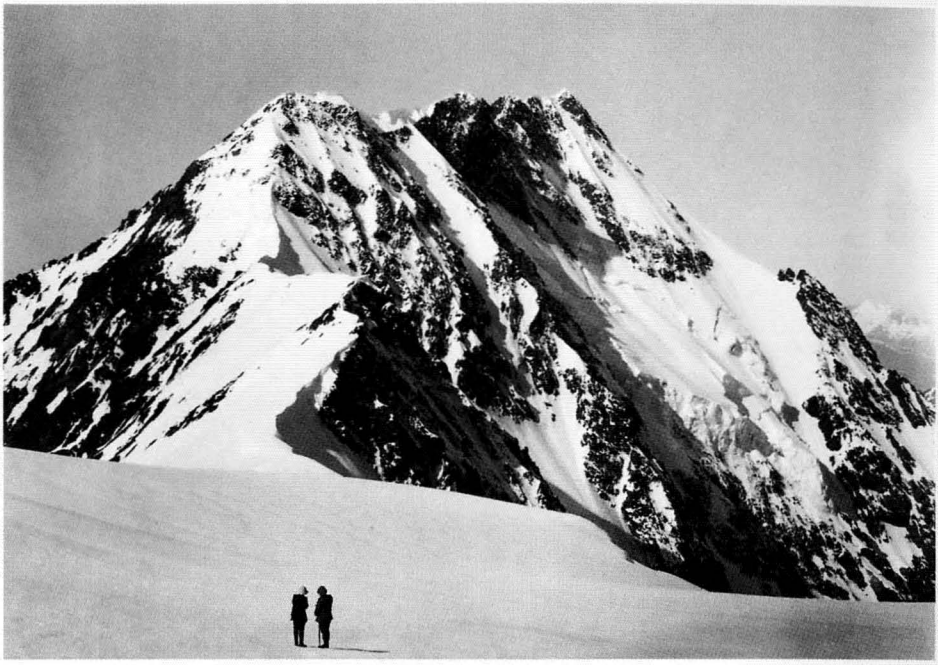
> The construction of the Zermatt-Gornergrat Railway is proceeding rapidly, and several hundred men are at work. It is expected that the first section as far as the Riffelalp will be finished by the end of the year.

After his climb on Mont Blanc de Cheilon Gallet moved to the Bernese Oberland where on 2 August with Josef and Gabriel Kalbermatten and Josef Rubin he made the first ascent of the ENE ridge of the Lauterbrunnen Breithorn. To the east the Rev A G S Raynor and J S Phillimore, accompanied by Antonio Dimai and Luigi Rizzi, continued their exploration of 'the wrong side of some Dolomites' by completing two outstanding climbs: the S face of the Pala di San Martino on 24 August and, four days later, the E face of the Catinaccio or Rosengarten. Another notable achievement in the Dolomites was the first ascent, on 17 August, of the N face of the Sassolungo – the Langkofel – by Werner Wildt with Sepp and Michel Innerkofler.

In June a famous event took place on the Wetterhorn when the great guide Christian Almer senior and his wife Margareta reached the summit to celebrate a special anniversary.

> Our readers know well that Christian Almer, of Grindelwald, has made a great number of 'new expeditions' in the Alps, but probably none of them was so original, and yet so appropriate, as that planned and carried out by him on the occasion of his golden wedding – an ascent of the Wetterhorn by himself (aged 70) and his wife (aged 72). Even more remarkable is the fact that Frau Almer had never before climbed a great snow mountain. The energetic old couple were accompanied by their eldest daughter and two of their younger sons, Hans and Peter, as well as by Dr. Huber, one of the medical men of Grindelwald. The party also included a photographer and his two porters. Starting from Grindelwald on Saturday, June 20, they spent the night at the Gleckstein Club hut, as well as the whole of the Sunday. Soon after midnight on the 22nd the actual ascent was begun, and so pluckily did Frau Almer climb on this her first *grande course* that at 6.20 A.M. the whole party attained the summit. Unfortunately wind and great cold prevented a long stay there, but the golden wedding party was well seen by their friends below, and was successfully photographed on the highest snowy crest by the artist who had accompanied them. The descent was safely effected and Grindelwald regained the same evening, other photographs of the party having been taken in the Club hut.

During the year many successful expeditions were completed in other ranges by members of the Alpine Club. In the Pyrenees in July Henri Brulle and Count René d'Astorg with Célestin Passet and François Bernard Salles achieved a remarkable first ascent, reaching the Grand Pic of the Pic du Midi d'Ossau (2885m) by way of the col known as La Fourche after making a spectacular rising traverse across the N face. In Norway on 8 August H C Bowen and C W Patchell with Johannes Vigdal made the first traverse



79. Tepli Tau, 4431m: approach by NE ridge. (*Vittorio Sella, 1896*) (p230)



80. Sugan Tau, 4490m, from N ridge of N peak. (*Vittorio Sella, 1896*) (p230)

of the ridge from Mellemste Skagastølstind to Store Skagastølstind (2403m), the peak first climbed by W C Slingsby 20 years earlier.

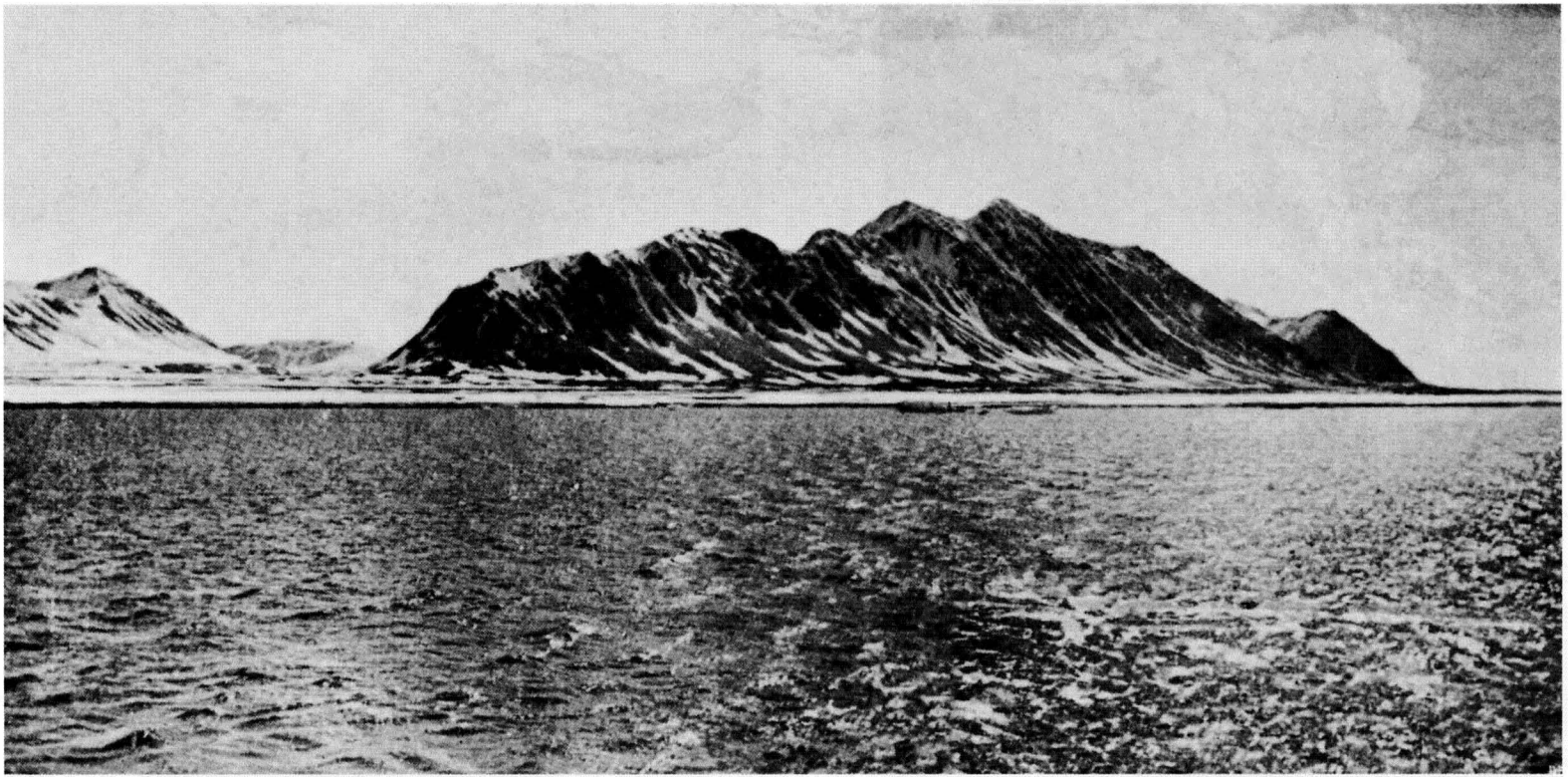
In August J G Cockin, H W Holder and Hermann Woolley, without guides, returned to the Caucasus where they completed a number of climbs in the central region. On 22 August, during a period of settled weather, the party made the first ascent of Adyrsu Bashi (4370m), reaching the summit by way of the NW ridge. Another visitor to the range was Vittorio Sella who with Emilio Gallo and two young servants from Biella travelled extensively for several weeks, taking many fine photographs and, on 25 July, reaching a height of some 4400m on Tepli Tau (4431m). On 22 August after climbing rocks 'which were frightfully rotten and steep' Sella and his party made the first ascent of the N, lower summit (4467m) of Sugan Tau (4490m).

In the far north a notable undertaking was the first of Sir Martin Conway's expeditions to Spitsbergen, the largest island in the Svalbard archipelago. Conway's party, which arrived at the entrance to Ice Fjord on the W coast on 18 June, included his cousin H E Conway the artist, J W Gregory of the British Museum, Aubyn Trevor-Battye as zoologist and E J Garwood. Addressing the Alpine Club in the following year Garwood recalled how later in the day after he had reached a high point on Mount Starashchin (778m, now Griegfjellet) – 'the south door-post to the entrance to Ice Fjord' – the fog lifted to reveal a fairyland of ice and snow.

> In the bay at my feet gigantic icebergs of a wondrous blue shimmered in the frosty light as they glided seawards on the ebbing tide. Beyond lay the ice-pack, and at the back of beyond lay that mysterious region the secret of which so many had tried in vain to solve, and which, in spite of many an heroic effort, it still clasps tightly in its icy grasp.

After establishing a base at Advent Point Conway and his companions assisted by two ponies – named Spits and Bergen – shipped from Norway spent two months in the region, reaching the E coast at Agardh Bay on 17 July to complete the first recorded crossing of the island. During this period Conway and Garwood climbed a number of peaks including Fox Peak[5] (956m) which they named on 26 June after following the track of a fox to the summit.

In August Conway took advantage of the favourable drift of the Arctic pack ice to charter a small steamer, the *Expres*, in which the party completed an exciting voyage of more than 1600km round the northern end of Spitsbergen, reaching the remote Walden Island and passing through the Hinlopen Strait. Conway later described[6] how after landing on Walden Island with ice-master Johannes Bottolfsen of the *Expres* he had examined various objects which had been abandoned by an earlier expedition.



81. Mount Starashchin (Griegfjellet), 778m, Spitsbergen. (*E J Garwood, 1896*) (p230)

> Strolling about, looking at the rubbish, I came upon what looked like a candle-end wrapped in paper. It seemed too hard for a candle, and I threw it violently on the rock at my feet, to see if it would break, for it was hard frozen. A yard or two farther on was a pile of similar objects. 'What are these?' I asked. 'Oh,' said Bottolfsen, 'those are part of the case of dynamite!' I did not try to break any more of them.

On 18 August, after Conway, his cousin and Gregory had departed for Norway with the ponies, Garwood, Trevor-Battye and Bottolfsen attempted to reach the highest point of Hornsundtind or Mount Hedgehog (1431m) but were defeated by fog and – as Garwood explained – unsuitable footwear.

> None of us had much to boast of in the way of boots. I was wearing Conway's, which were a quarter of an inch too short for me. Trevor-Battye had some old shooting-boots with small mud nails, while we rigged Bottolfsen up in some ancient sea-boots, into which we hammered some cricket spikes which we discovered in Trevor-Battye's old canvas waders.

A few days later Garwood and Trevor-Battye were reunited with their companions at Tromsø where the party took leave of the ponies and attended a banquet which had been arranged to welcome Fridtjof Nansen,[7] the Norwegian explorer.

The expedition, which was supported by the Royal Society and the Royal Geographical Society, was of great interest and Conway, who surveyed a large area of the interior, made an important contribution to the exploration of the region.

On 15 October E A FitzGerald sailed for South America with the aim of making the first ascent of Aconcagua (6959m), the highest peak in the western hemisphere.

> The objects of the expedition are scientific, and the ascent of the mountain will be made in a leisurely manner. Mr. FitzGerald's object is to watch the effect of the various altitudes on the system, and from this to see whether it is possible to climb higher peaks in the Himalayas.

During the summer a surveyor, Alan de Trafford, the geologist Stuart Vines and Philip Gosse, a naturalist accepted invitations to join the party which was completed by Mattias Zurbriggen, the guide who had accompanied FitzGerald to the Southern Alps of New Zealand in the previous year, four porters – Josef and Ludwig Pollinger, Josef Lochmatter and Nicola Lanti – and Fritz Weibel, as cook. In preparation for the undertaking the party



82. Snowdon Mountain Railway: train at Halfway station. *(Snowdon Mountain Railway Collection)* (p232)

spent several weeks in the Zermatt district, establishing a number of camps on the Hohberg glacier where a heliograph and other instruments were tested.

After travelling by rail to Punta de las Vacas and establishing a base near Puente del Inca FitzGerald received a telegram informing him 'that the German Athletic Club at Santiago was making arrangements to attempt the ascent of the mountain at once.'[8] In view of this news FitzGerald decided to make his own attempt without delay and approached the peak by way of the Horcones valley on 23 December accompanied by Zurbriggen who had reconnoitred the route, the four porters, ten mules and two horses.

Leaving supplies at a base beside the Horcones glacier the party commenced the ascent of the NW face and on 26 December, after a high camp had been established at 5700m, Zurbriggen found the card left by Paul Güssfeldt who had attempted to climb the peak 13 years earlier. After resting at a lower camp in the valley to recover from the effect of the altitude and intense cold FitzGerald, Zurbriggen and the porters returned to the high camp with fresh provisions but on 31 December an attempt to reach the summit had to be abandoned when Zurbriggen was overcome by the cold.

In the Canadian Rockies the first recorded climbing fatality in the range occurred on 3 August during an attempt by P S Abbot, C E Fay, G T Little and C S Thompson to make the first ascent of Mount Lefroy (3423m). The climbers had reached the pass which is now known as Abbot Pass and were approaching the summit when Abbot, who was leading, fell to his death on the steep slopes of the W face.

At home new routes were completed in all the principal regions. In Wales, where the Snowdon Mountain Railway was officially opened on 6 April,[9] J M Archer Thomson and Harold Hughes joined forces with Oscar Eckenstein, H Edwards and W A Thomson to make the first ascent of *East Gully* on Lliwedd. In the Lake District on 20 April O G Jones succeeded in climbing the pitch now known as *Jones' Arête* while making an ascent of Scafell Pinnacle from Deep Ghyll with A P and G D Abraham. In Scotland a famous climb – *Naismith's Route* – was completed on Buachaille Etive Mor in August when W W Naismith and William Douglas made the first ascent of the Crowberry Ridge.

An event which aroused considerable interest was the publication, in two volumes, of *The Exploration of the Caucasus* by D W Freshfield. This fine work, illustrated with photographs taken by Vittorio Sella and other contributors, was well received, being described as 'truly one of the most delightful and inspiring works upon the "everlasting hills" which any library can hold.' Other books published during the year included FitzGerald's *Climbs in the New Zealand Alps* and *The Heart of a Continent,* the account by F E Younghusband of his journeys through the Karakoram, the Pamirs and other parts of Asia.

In conclusion it is a pleasure to note the centenary of the Akademischer Alpen-Club Zürich which was founded during the year and to quote a comment relating to one of the Club's early reports which appeared in the *Alpine Journal.*

> This small but most energetic Club, which consists of 2 honorary members, 34 ordinary and extraordinary members, and 77 'old gentlemen', has a marvellous record for last season. The forty-five members who sent in reports had collectively ascended 339 summits and crossed 95 passes. Of the ascents 40 were new, whilst the percentage of expeditions with guides was under 1 per cent. of the whole.
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> It is amusing to note that the 'old gentlemen' include such redoubtable names as V. A. Fynn, Dr. Helbling, Prof. Dr. Paulcke, and Dr. Herzog. One wonders what is expected of the young gentlemen who constitute the ordinary members! The Club owns two huts – the Mischabel hut and the Windgällen hut in the Maderaner Thal, rebuilt last year. One most willingly echoes the words with which the Report closes, 'Heil A.A.C.Z.!'

REFERENCES

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

2 A visitor at St Moritz with his sister Miss Charlotte (Lottie) Dod, the lawn tennis champion who won the first of her five Ladies' Singles titles at Wimbledon before she was 16 years old.

3 The first ascent had been made by A F Mummery, J N Collie, Geoffrey Hastings and W C Slingsby on 25 July 1893.

4 A similar accident had occurred on the E ridge when W A Lewis and Noel H Paterson, with their three guides, were killed on 6 September 1877.

5 Now Foxtoppen, the English word 'Fox' having been retained.

6 Sir William Martin Conway, *The First Crossing of Spitsbergen.* London, J M Dent & Co, 1897.

7 During his famous expedition with the ship *Fram* Nansen had reached 86° 14' N, the highest latitude then attained by man.

8 E A FitzGerald, *The Highest Andes.* London, Methuen & Co, 1899.

9 An accident occurred on the same day and the line was then closed until the following year.