
History & Geography

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Edward Whymper's Lecture Slides

(Plates 68-74)

In the archives of the Alpine Club two small pine boxes of magic lantern slides have been lying unregarded for the last fifty years, slides which now give us a glimpse of the world of mountaineering in Victorian times through the eyes of one of the pioneers, Edward Whymper. The *Alpine Journal* for 1945¹ records the donation:

Mrs M A Barron, of St Albans, has most kindly presented to the Club two boxes containing the identical lantern slides used by Edward Whymper for illustrating his lectures 'My Scrambles amongst the Alps'. One box has the full complement of 50 slides, views in the Zermatt district, the other, 43 slides illustrating his climbs in the Mont Blanc district. All are most carefully indexed and in correct order. The Club offers its warm thanks to Mrs Barron for this most interesting gift.

I have not yet been able to establish who Mrs Barron was and why she should have been in a position to give the Club these slides. A cutting from a local paper² tells us that she died in 1972 aged 81 and had a son, Wing Commander Oswald Barron DFC, who was killed in a Mosquito raid over France in 1944. Another son, Captain Norman Barron, and a daughter, Miss Evelyn Barron, are also mentioned in the article. Contacts with the Whymper family³ suggest that they are not related, so any ideas readers may have would be welcome.

These lantern slides are associated with the lecturing career which began relatively late in Whymper's life, but it may be that the seeds of his fascination with the world of high mountains were sown when he was 18 years old and went to a lecture by another early Alpine Club member:

In the evening I visited for the first time Mr Albert Smith's entertainment of Mont Blanc, etc ... People often go to these sort of things with exorbitant expectations raised by previous descriptions which have been told them; I however found myself quite satisfied and more.⁴

Whymper himself took great pains to satisfy his audience. In Frank Smythe's biography of Whymper⁵ it is reported that 'every word had to be



Edward Whymper's lecture slides:

68. The Matterhorn from the Théodule Glacier (p209)



69. Tumble Corner: "In attempting to pass the corner I slipped and fell." (p211)

written out and learnt; every phrase, nuance and gesture rehearsed again and again' and 'his clear forceful diction as well as his unfailing sense of the dramatic combined to make him and his lectures on the Alps and the Andes popular among audiences all over the country'.

In 1896 Whymper took a new lecture entitled 'My Scrambles Amongst the Alps' to Switzerland. It was given for the first time in Davos:

Began 10 minutes late, waiting for late arrivals. Took 1 hour and 25 minutes. The place was quite full and seats ran short. Bontwood the lantern man did pretty well, but he is slow with the double lantern, and his lenses are not good; the edges of the views were always out of focus. Was well received, but as the audience was two thirds female, little applause and a good deal of whispering.⁶

I believe that the slides in the Alpine Club's possession are the illustrations for this lecture. They may even be the set used that evening in Davos.

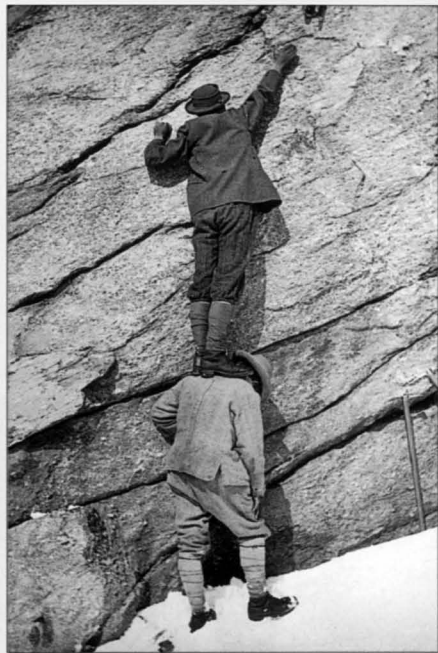
The lantern slides are contained in two fitted boxes. Each has a neatly printed list of captions, together with emendations and comments for the operator in Whymper's own hand: 'Quick, vite' against certain groups, for example. The slides are 3¼ inch square, double glass with passe-partout edging, marked W. Watson & Sons, 313 High Holborn, London, Magic Lantern and Slide Manufacturers. Some are masked to give a circular or elliptical view. Apart from three maps with hand-coloured sections, all are black-and-white, mostly taken from photographs. The subject matter of the photographs indicates that they were taken during visits to the Alps in 1894 and 1895 when Whymper was gathering material for his Chamonix and Zermatt guidebooks.⁷

Whymper opened his lecture with a slide, reproduced on the opposite page, showing a facsimile of the closing sentence of a letter from Lord Tennyson. This tribute from one of the leading figures of the Victorian establishment clearly meant a good deal to Whymper. The accident which followed the first ascent of the Matterhorn tinged Whymper's fame with notoriety, even after the success of his book *Scrambles amongst the Alps* published in 1879; but ten years later his successful expedition to the Andes was greeted with unreserved public approval. Perhaps Tennyson was present at the lecture at the Royal Institution in 1881 after which the Prince of Wales (the future King Edward VII) moved a vote of thanks.

Slides of two of Scheuchzer's dragons – which, presumably, Whymper did not find on any of his Alpine summits – and a general map of the western Alps are followed by thirty views of the villages and peaks of the Zermatt valley. (*Plate 72*) It is interesting to note that while the villages appear simple and unspoiled, Zermatt itself a century ago was already highly built up with many substantial buildings. The slides include details of glacier features such as moulins, crevasses and séracs, as well as a charming group of children entitled 'Buy my edelweiss'.



70. The Great Tower on the Italian Ridge of the Matterhorn, with the 'old' and 'new' cabanes (p211)



71. Mutual Assistance (p211)



72. The village of Stalden in the Zermatt valley (p210)

I don't think that I have ever
 been higher than about 7000
 feet, & so I look up to you
 Chamborazians & Crapaxians
 with all the greater veneration

Yours very truly
 J. Whymper

The remainder of the first box consists of pictures from the Italian Ridge of the Matterhorn which I believe to be a record of Whymper's visit in August 1895. There are no fewer than three pictures of 'Tumble Corner' (Plate 69), below the Col du Lion, where he very nearly came to grief in 1862 – no doubt the audience was treated to a graphic description of this event. The slide entitled 'Mutual Assistance' (Plate 71) – one climber on another's shoulders – probably raised a laugh, whilst a portrait of Michel Croz, who lost his life in the 1865 accident, reminded listeners of the perils of mountaineering.

The second box takes us to Chamonix in July 1894, when Whymper made an ascent of Mont Blanc accompanied by the guides Daniel Maquignaz and Matthias Zurbriggen, with a young local man called Paul Breton to carry the photographic equipment. He was incensed by the roster system of allocating guides, and probably commented on the slide of the 'Bureau des Guides' (Plate 73) with sarcastic words from his diary of the previous year:

Visited Guide Chief to ask his permission to allow me a guide and five porters for Mont Blanc. He graciously allowed me.⁸



73. The Bureau des Guides at Chamonix (p211)



74. Dr Janssen ascending Mont Blanc in a litter (p212)

On this occasion the party spent two nights at the Janssen Observatory. (See Plate 83, *AJ99*, 1994) The temperature inside the hut was as low as 19°F and the picture shows a snowy interior which can hardly have been comfortable. Whymper clearly had his tongue in his cheek when he placed slides of Dr Janssen next to another of a dragon and then one of the learned doctor himself being carried up the mountain in a litter. (Plate 74) And we have guides falling into crevasses and breaking through snow bridges in very contrived photographs which provoke a smile these days even if they were intended to strike terror into the hearts of audiences one hundred years ago. The series finishes with portraits of Frederic Payot – one of Whymper's last visitors before he died in Chamonix in 1911 – and two of Melchior Anderegg, the 'Melchior' whose name in Alpine Switzerland, according to *Scrambles*, was as well known as the name of Napoleon:

Melchior, too, is an Emperor in his way – a very Prince among guides. His empire is amongst the 'eternal snows' – his sceptre is an ice-axe.⁹

So ended Whymper's lecture, with a tribute to one of the men who made the Golden Age of mountaineering possible.

What is the significance of this collection of lantern slides? Much of the material is familiar from other sources, and it dates from long after Whymper's principal achievements in the mountains, but it does indicate what it was that he believed to be significant and of interest to the public, as well as giving us a little insight into his character and sense of humour.

REFERENCES

- 1 AJ55, 219, 1945-46.
- 2 Herts Advertiser, 23 June 1972.
- 3 Mrs Nigella Hall (AC) and Mr Timothy Woodgate.
- 4 Edward Whymper diary, 4 June 1858.
- 5 F S Smythe, *Edward Whymper*, Hodder & Stoughton 1940.
- 6 Edward Whymper diary, undated entry quoted by Smythe.
- 7 Edward Whymper, *Chamonix and the range of Mont Blanc*, Murray 1896 and *The Valley of Zermatt and the Matterhorn*, Murray 1897.
- 8 Edward Whymper diary, July 1893 entry quoted by Smythe.
- 9 Edward Whymper, *Scrambles amongst the Alps 1860-69*, 1st edition, p192, Murray 1871.

Note: It is intended to re-create Whymper's lecture at the Alpine Club, using extracts from Edward Whymper's books as commentaries to the slides (which have been copied for this purpose in the usual 35mm format). Advice on conservation has been obtained from the National Museum of Photography in Bradford.