

Correspondence

To the Editor of the Alpine Journal

Sir,

With reference to Miriam C. Meijer's article 'The Fifth Ascent of Mont Blanc', vol 105, 2000, pp 177-189. The *Alpine Journal* has historically been a key source of research information on Alpine matters, not least on the subject of the early ascents of Mont Blanc. The classic articles by the likes of de Beer, Brown, Freshfield, Mathews, Montagnier, Stevens, *et al* have set a high standard which we feel should be the yardstick by which current contributions are measured. Given this, there is much reason to be disappointed by the above article, which has fallen into numerous errors, mainly it would appear by committing the unfortunate mistake of preferring secondary sources to primary. One of these is a highly questionable secondary source, Engel's book *Mountaineering in the Alps*, the first edition of which was entitled *A History of Mountaineering in the Alps*. (The review in AJ 58, pp 138-45 provides some indication of the extent of the mistakes contained in this book.)

First let us deal with the clear-cut errors:

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| Page 178, para 2 | It is generally accepted that Balmat was born in 1762, not 1761. |
| Page 178, para 3 | Paccard and Balmat left for Mont Blanc on 7 August 1786. 7 June 1786 comes directly from Engel, who got it wrong in both versions of her book. |
| Page 179, para 1 | Beaufoy was made an FRS on 18 February 1790 and a Colonel on 20 January 1897 and was thus neither of these when he ascended Mont Blanc in 1787, at which point he was only 23 years of age. |
| Page 179, para 3 | It was Balmat who was interviewed by Dumas, not Bourrit, who had been dead some thirteen years by this time. |
| Page 179, para 4 | Balmat most certainly did not 'avoid any more expeditions'. He ascended Mont Blanc on four other occasions, including that referred to in the following sentence of Meijer's article, and attempted it at least once in addition to these. |
| Page 184, para 5 | One understands what Meijer means by saying that 'Paccard's lack of a book made de Saussure the first to ascend Mont Blanc'. However to be fair to de Saussure, his own account does mention Paccard's ascent in the first sentence. Had Meijer taken the trouble to read this, one doubts she would have made this assertion. |

- Note 11 Paccard's route is not today's *voie normale*. The only part of the route that he 'inaugurated' is the so-called *Ancien Passage*, which is most certainly not even one of the normal routes up the mountain today, let alone *the* normal route.
- Notes 27 & 32 How did a letter supposedly written in the previous July describe events from an ascent that took place in August?

On matters more to do with opinion:

- Page 177, para 2 It is unfortunate that the first sentence of this paragraph erroneously gives the impression that Camper climbed Mont Blanc. However, setting that on one side, to suggest that he and Woodley were somehow 'Grand Tourists' and that Beaufoy was not is, to say the least, contentious. Patently, Beaufoy was as much in the Alps on a 'trip' as they were and to disqualify him just because he climbed the mountain carrying a barometer, when Meijer fails to disqualify Camper who 'although a scientist. . . sent his father lapidary materials from Mont Blanc', smacks of the partial.
- Page 177, para 2 Related to the previous point, there is no evidence to support the view that Woodley's ascent represents 'the first act of alpinism as a pure sport'.
- Page 177, para 3 To describe Bourrit as a journalist is misleading. Undoubtedly he wrote for journals from time to time but there is no sense in which he was a journalist in the modern usage of the word.
- Page 180, para 3 The proposition that 'The lack of air in the big ice troughs of the plateau causes many people, even excellent climbers, to suffer from mountain sickness', is ludicrous. Surely there is no less air in the 'troughs' than there is on the surface of the glacier at this point. Given that this whole section comes virtually word for word from Engel, perhaps Meijer may be forgiven, but she would have been wiser to credit it as a quote.
- Note 1 The seven writers mentioned in this note are all unknown to us and we suspect to the majority of readers of the AJ. It would have been helpful if normal protocols had been followed and some kind of reference had been made to their work.
- Note 23 We are unable to find the relevant reference in Whymper's work and again it would have been

helpful if a page number had been provided. As regards the second part of this note, we are unaware of any published illustrations of de Saussure's ascent by Bourrit and believe that there were none.

Finally, whereas the Camper papers are clearly of some interest to students of the history of Mont Blanc, they scarcely justify the thirteen pages devoted to this article. It would of course have occupied much less space than this had the author not spent so much time perhaps unnecessarily revisiting the first ascent of the mountain, which has been widely debated in the *AJ* and elsewhere over the past one hundred years or more. This would have had the added virtue of limiting the number of errors quite considerably.

Yours faithfully,
Jerry Lovatt and Alan Lyall

To the Editor of the *Alpine Journal*

Sir,

I appreciate Messers Lyall and Lovatt's careful reading of my article in the *Alpine Journal* 2000 and their corrections of some mistakes. However, I do have to argue a few points. I am not a sloppy or careless historian. Their statement that my article was undeserving of thirteen pages in the *Alpine Journal* is not borne out by their evidence for 'numerous errors'. Camper's papers are a primary source for the fifth ascent of Mont Blanc and neither he nor I disguised the fact that only Woodley reached the summit. Camper's letters make no sense without their historical context. Bourrit, Camper's companion, has an historically significant connection to the first ascent – he influenced how it was handed down to posterity – and hence I had to discuss the preceding four ascents. My summary of this complex story was not a rushed job. I used more than one library and archive, did much translating, and had an experienced native mountaineer (and multi-linguist) identify all the places mentioned by Camper.

The fact that you have managed to find a few errors does not surprise me. My research for my dissertation and book on Petrus Camper found mistakes in all kinds of publications, even among the most distinguished of authors. I corrected errors when I could, but no doubt some new ones crept into my own final production. As we say in American slang: "Hey, it happens! Get over it." This is why a historian's work is never done. The Internet will not solve this old problem; key in the question who first climbed Mont Blanc and study the numerous different answers. I concede that my claim that it was Bourrit rather than Balmat whom Dumas interviewed is incorrect. But I can recall how it happened: I was reading Yves Ballu, who gives the most positive interpretation of Bourrit, to counterbalance Claire

Engel, who has the most severe opinion of him, and mixed up the names because Ballu paraphrased what Dumas disseminated which Bourrit had orchestrated. (Yves Ballu, Introduction in Marc-Théodore Bourrit, *Description des Glaciers Glaciers et Amas de Glace du Duché de Savoie*, Geneva: Slatkine, 1977, pxxvii). Adriaan Gilles Camper's odd usage of months in the letters and diary stumped me also, but similar oddities have occurred in other travel diaries, for example that of Arthur Young, and I reported it faithfully. Many things that are standardised today were not standardised in the eighteenth century. This is also why secondary as well as primary sources have to be used together with critical judgement. Suppose I had relied on Balmat's version in Dumas? The recent editions of Dumas all have to add that Balmat basically lied to Dumas. I stand corrected by T Graham Brown's review of Engel, but do note that he agrees that Saussure was not entirely honest in giving Paccard his due. Jeremy Bernstein blames Saussure for not doing more to set the record straight during Paccard's lifetime (*Ascent: The Invention of Mountain Climbing and Its Practice*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1989, p42). I would change reference 23 to read 'Whymper, p37' and 'This appeared confirmed in the illustrations of Saussure's journey.' The facts that Beaufoy read his paper to the Royal Society four months after his ascent because he observed the latitude and altitude of the sun, and his gifted wife calculated the results from the observations he made on the summit, persuade me that Beaufoy was of the scientific persuasion. Such a motive was entirely absent in the chance meeting of the three independent nationalities in 1788. Bourrit, Woodley, and Camper, all indifferent to scientific concerns during their expedition, climbed for the purposes of fame, athletics, or aesthetics. Camper was motivated by Saussure, by J J Rousseau, even by Bourrit – but not Paccard. That the first ascent was not the most famous ascent is rare, if not unique, in history. Saussure had pursued an activity that had been seen as only fit for the unfortunate alpine peasantry and thereby revealed a new upper continent for exploration. This was the difference of social class before the French Revolution and evidence of the might of the pen. Let me correct your own error: Beaufoy was made a Colonel in 1797 – not 1897 (DNB 2, 1922, p. 51)! The latest popular book on Mont Blanc history, Fergus Fleming's *Killing Dragons: The Conquest of the Alps*, only had Bourrit to rely on for the fifth ascent. Alas, he was unaware of my article in the *Alpine Journal*.

Sincerely,
Miriam Claude Meijer, PhD