
LINDSAY ELMS

The First Editor

The Legacy of Hereford Brooke George



Hereford Brooke George, first editor of the *Alpine Journal*,
with his niece: date unknown. (*George Family*)

*George, more than most of the climbers, 'looked the part'. With a red beard and great height, he was massive and confident both of mind and of body, with a record both on the mountains and in the sphere of Alpine organisation quite equal to the reputation he later acquired as an historian.*¹

Hereford Brooke George was born at Bath in Somerset on 1 January 1838, the eldest of three children born to Richard Francis George, surgeon, and his wife Elizabeth Brooke. He entered Winchester College as a scholar in 1849, and in 1856 became a fellow at New College, Oxford, which remained an exclusive Wykehamist enclave. He did well in his 'mods', with first classes in Classics and maths, but took seconds in his finals. He graduated in 1860, proceeding to his MA in 1862 and was called to the bar at the Inner Temple on 6 June 1864, following the western circuit until 1867 when he returned to New College as tutor in the combined school of law and history. He was ordained in 1868, but undertook no parochial work. After the separation of the law and history schools in 1872 he became history tutor at New College, filling that office until 1891. In this period New College was transformed from one of the smallest Oxford colleges to one of the largest, opening itself to fellows beyond Winchester, a process George helped drive and then described in his *New College 1850-1906* (1906). He played a prominent part in the establishment of the inter-collegiate system of lecturing at Oxford and was one of the first members of the Oxford University volunteer corps.

His historical writings and teaching were chiefly concerned with military history and the relationship between history and geography: *Genealogical Tables illustrative of Modern History* (1874), *Battles of English History* (1895), *Napoleon's Invasion of Russia* (1899), *Relations of Geography and History* (1901), *Historical Geography of the British Empire* (1904), and *Historical Evidence* (1909). The AC member and assistant editor T S Blakeney, always a delicately shrewd observer, described him as 'a solid rather than a light-hearted writer.'

Hereford George took up mountaineering during that familiar period W A B Coolidge called the 'Golden Age', between the ascent of the Wetterhorn in 1854 by Alfred Wills, although not of course the *first* ascent, and Edward Whymper's triumph and tragedy on the Matterhorn in 1865. It was the decade during which almost all the major peaks in the Alps were first climbed, culminating in the particularly successful years of 1864 and 1865. On George's first visit to Switzerland in 1860, he met Leslie Stephen, who would follow him as editor of the *Alpine Journal*, at Zermatt and accompanied him up to the Riffel by the Gorner glacier. In 1862, George accompanied Stephen on the first passage by the Jungfrauoch, and made the first ascent of the Gross Fiescherhorn on 23 July 1862 with Adolphus Warburton Moore and guides Christian Almer and Ulrich Kaufmann. In 1863, he made a passage of the Col du Tour Noir with Christian Almer as guide, and investigated the relative positions of the heads of the Argentine, Tour,

1. R Clark, *The Victorian Mountaineers*, Batsford, 1953.

and Saline glaciers. His interest in climbing was chiefly geographical and scientific and he was one of the first Alpine climbers to use photography.

In 1861, George joined the Alpine Club. That year the establishment of the *Alpine Journal* was suggested at a meeting in his rooms at New College and George went on to edit its first three volumes (1863 to 1867). In his very first 'Introductory Address', he explained that it had been thought worth making more widely known 'the amount of geographical and other information' that Alpine Club members acquired each year that had hitherto only been available to those able to attend the Club's meetings. Narratives would be written by members of the Alpine Club, but it was hoped that with 'Alpine Notes and Queries', a very useful portion of the *Alpine Journal* would be open to anyone filling in gaps in climbing knowledge. Any fears that the Journal had arrived too late and that all the great ascents had been done could be easily dispelled. George directed readers to less frequented areas of the Alps. 'Moreover,' he wrote, 'the Himalayas, which are daily becoming more accessible to enterprise, offer an unlimited field for adventure,' as well as all the other ranges where 'the Englishman's foot is some day destined to scale.'

Also important to George was the inclusion of scientific objectives: there were nine such papers on subjects as diverse as the structure of névé, minimum thermometers, phosphorescent snow, electricity in the Pyrenees, and on. Of more immediately pragmatic use was the 'Report of the Special Committee of the Alpine Club on Ropes, Axes and Alpenstocks' reports on Ropes and Ice Axes, discussions on glacial theories, camping out (tents, sleeping bags, cooking apparatus) and 'Accidents and their Causes'. In volumes two and three, George went well outside the Alps, dealing with the Caucasus and outlying Alpine areas.

He forged a style the *Alpine Journal*, according to Blakeney: 'was long to lose, if indeed it ever completely did so.' He had the advantage that his tenure began as the Golden Age reached its climax: 1864 and 1865. He reprinted Whymper's letter to *The Times* with the dramatic account of the first ascent of the Matterhorn and the disaster that followed, and happier stories, like Moore's ascent of the Brenva. Some of his successors seemed to relish controversy. Coolidge could famously do anything with a hatchet except bury it. George avoided such heat, as Blakeney recorded: 'he was not involved in any particular quarrels or disputes, such as enlivened some later editorships. Nor had the day arrived when mountain masses were to become increasingly sub-divided until every point or declivity had its name as a peak or a pass.'

In 1866, Hereford George published *The Oberland and Its Glaciers: Explored and Illustrated with Ice-Axe and Camera*, which included 28 photographic illustrations by Ernest Edwards. In its review, *The Gentleman's Magazine* said:

... two tools [ice-axe and camera] that have not much in common, yet have conspired to produce one of the best books we have yet seen illustrated by photograph. ... Mr. George is admirably adapted to the character of the work. The narrative portions are smart and racy; the descriptive clear and concatenated.



Hereford Brooke George in his academic gown, New College, Oxford.
(George Family)



On the Unter Grindelwald Glacier, circa 1862. The image appears in George's well received *The Oberland and its Glaciers: Explored and Illustrated with Ice-Axe and Camera*. (George Family)



The southern aspect of Mount Victoria, third-highest peak on Vancouver Island, where George's great-grandson perished in 2006. (Lindsay Elms)

George had written the book to popularise the glacier theories of John Tyndall. In his introduction he wrote:

The writer has often found that people who have never seen a glacier, however keenly they may be interested in glacier theory for its own sake, and in mountain adventure on behalf of their friends, are unable to obtain any clear idea of what a glacier really is, except from elaborate viva voce explanation of Alpine pictures. Professor Tyndall's 'Glaciers of the Alps', the most lucid in style of all works on glacier theory, was written mainly to enunciate an entirely new doctrine, and therefore contains much of argument and controversy, which are necessary for a sufficient understanding of subject by those who are content to take one set of opinions on trust, without entering deeply into the controversy.

Tyndall, the prominent 19th century Irish physicist, must have seemed the ideal mountaineer to George, having made his first visit to the Alps in 1856 for scientific reasons and becoming one of the great pioneering climbers in the process. He visited the Alps almost every summer from 1856 onward. In the Alps, Tyndall studied glaciers, especially glacier motion and in 1860 he wrote his *Glaciers of the Alps*. His explanation of glacial flow brought him into dispute with others, particularly James David Forbes, who had done much of the early scientific work on glacier motion. But Forbes at that time didn't know the phenomenon of 'regelation', the theory of ice melting under pressure and freezing again when pressure is reduced, a process Michael Faraday discovered a little later.

In 1876, members of the Alpine Club who were resident at Oxford University and shared an interest in Alpine pursuits formed the Oxford Alpine Club. George was one of the prime movers. A year after the club was officially founded they produced the first printed list of members. The original rules from 1876 stated that the club was to consist of 'not more than Thirty Resident Members of the University interested in the objects of the Alpine Club.' Candidates who were members of the Alpine Club were admitted automatically, for others admission was by ballot, with one adverse vote in six resulting in exclusion. The club would dine once a year, early in Trinity term, and would have one meeting each year in October. The subscription was set at 15 shillings, later reduced to 12s 6d, and included dinner. The only reference to the management of the club in the original rules was rule six: 'A Secretary, who shall also be Treasurer, shall be elected annually at the meeting in Michaelmas Term.' There was no provision for a president, nor any kind of committee. Hereford George was elected the first secretary, fulfilling this role from 1876 to 1901, when he was elected the club's first president. He had been running the club for 25 years; presumably the position of president was created as a tribute.

Very few records survive of the ordinary meetings held each year. However, a few notices show that the meetings generally consisted of someone, often Hereford George, reading a paper, sometimes accompanied by photos. There was probably very little club business to be dealt with at these meetings, since George had already dealt with most of it. He used to send around circulars to the members, asking for them to inform him if they disagreed with one of his proposals. It seems nobody ever did. For example, in 1879 members were more or less told that the secretary was sending £5 of the club's money 'to the relief of the sufferers by the great fire, which recently almost destroyed Meyringen [Switzerland].' In 1901, when Hereford George relinquished the job of secretary, the members' list failed to record who took over the role. In 1909, the Oxford mountaineering community divided into the Oxford University Mountaineering Club for undergraduate members, and the Oxford Alpine Club for alumni.

In 1870, George married Alice Bourdillon Cole, with whom he had two sons. A decade later, George, who inherited a moderate fortune from his father, found himself in financial dire straits. His wealth came from his

interest in the West of England and South Wales Bank at Bristol, and although he took no active part in the management of its affairs he was a director. The failure of the bank in 1880 not only injured George financially but involved him with his fellow directors in an aborted trial for irregularities in keeping the accounts. Hereford Brooke George died at Holywell Lodge, Oxford on 15 December 1910.

During his editorship of the *Alpine Journal*, and after Edward Whymper's accident on the Matterhorn in 1865, Queen Victoria had written in her diary how 'four poor Englishmen including a brother of Lord Queensberry have lost their lives in Switzerland, descending over a dangerous place from the Matterhorn and falling over a precipice.' The dangers of alpinism clearly vexed her because almost two decades later, during another deadly season in the Alps, she asked her private secretary Sir Henry Ponsonby to write to the prime minister William Gladstone seeking to make public her disapproval. Gladstone's measured reply settled things. 'It may be questionable whether, upon the whole, mountain-climbing (and be it remembered that Snowdon has its victims as well as the Matterhorn) is more destructive than various other pursuits in the way of recreation.' George was no longer the *Alpine Journal* editor, but even at the time he had felt it necessary to comment. He was not given to editorialising.

In an odd twist of fate, in 2006, Hereford Brooke George's great-grandson Brooke George died aged 61 in a mountaineering accident on a mountain named after Her Majesty: Victoria Peak, the third-highest mountain on Vancouver Island, Canada.