

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE EARLY ASCENTS OF THE WETTERHÖRNER

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THERE has recently been given to the Alpine Club the original letter that (Sir) Alfred Wills wrote to his mother on September 18, 1854, describing his ascent of the Wetterhorn, and the study of it has prompted the following remarks concerning the tangle of evidence that surrounds the early ascents of the Wetterhörner.

In *Die Alpen*, 1949, pp. 46–50 and 118–20, Dr. G. R. de Beer and Mr. R. Morrison¹ summarise the evidence and set out the order in which they consider the first ten attempts or ascents were made during the period 1844–54. They correct Herr Carl Egger² in some particulars, but in our opinion certain of the climbs are more open to question than they allow. We regard as disputable :

(A) The first ascent of the Hasli Jungfrau from Grindelwald by G. Roth and F. Fankhauser, July 7, 1845.

(B) The two climbs made by E. J. Blackwell in June, 1854.

(A) *Roth and Fankhauser*. The evidence for their ascent is given by *Die Alpen*, 1940, pp. 263–6, and in support is the statement of Speer that two days after it he saw, from the Mittelhorn, a baton on the Hasli Jungfrau as well as one upon the Rosenhorn.

Dr. de Beer relies upon Speer's *Athenæum* article of November 1, 1845,³ but it may be noted that Speer in the article reprinted in *A. J.* 17, pp. 105–15, and in his article in *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal*, January 24, 1846, does not mention any batons. In his letter to the *Daily News*, August 7, 1856, however, commenting on Wills's recently reviewed book, Speer does say that he saw that each of the other two peaks 'was crowned by a flagstaff or alpenstock.' But he adds that on making enquiries he had found out that the mark seen on the Hasli Jungfrau had been put up not long before the time of his ascent of the Mittelhorn (July 9, 1845)⁴ by his own guide, J. Jaun, 'who had ascended the mountain from Rosenlauri, whither he had conducted M. Agassiz.'

¹ For brevity's sake, we shall refer to this valuable article simply as 'de Beer.'

² *A. J.* 56. pp. 82–4.

³ We do not consider any reliance should be put upon the inference made in *A. J.* 30. 212, that Speer had attempted the Mittelhorn in 1843. It seems plain to us that the year has been wrongly transcribed, and should read '1845.' Perhaps the point can be verified, if the Visitors' Book of the Grimsel Hospice, 1836–48, is still in existence. [See below, p. 536.—*Editor*.]

⁴ We have followed de Beer and Egger in assuming July 9 to be the correct date of Speer's ascent, but we would observe that his account in *A. J.* 17 shows the date as July 8, which is that given in *Schweizerischer Beobachter* No. 85, quoted by Egger, and also by Conway and Coolidge in *The Bernese Oberland*, vol. 2, p. 118.

On the face of it, this would mean that Jaun told Speer that he had planted the mark after his ascent with Bannholzer (the first ascent of the Hasli Jungfrau) from Rosenlauri on August 31, 1844. He could not have told Speer that he had placed the mark at the time he had taken Agassiz up the mountain, for the simple reason that Agassiz's climb, July 31, 1845, was later than Speer's ascent of the Mittelhorn. It seems clear that Speer, writing eleven years later, confused the Jaun-Bannholzer climb with that of Agassiz and Jaun.

But, since Roth and Fankhauser claim to have ascended the Hasli Jungfrau on July 7, 1845, two days before Speer's ascent of the Mittelhorn, it could have been their baton that was seen by Speer, though Jaun, excusably, might not have known it at the time. Speer says⁵ that Roth and Fankhauser ascended a peak the summit of which had first been reached in 1844 by the same men who had taken him up the Mittelhorn. Coolidge, in a footnote to Speer's article, assumes that this peak ascended in 1844 was the Hasli Jungfrau, but it could equally have been the Rosenhorn, also first climbed that same year by Jaun. If one could believe that Roth and Fankhauser had climbed the Rosenhorn, not the Hasli Jungfrau, it would render intelligible their statement in the *Schweizerischer Beobachter* of July 19, 1845, quoted by Egger,⁶ that Speer was on a peak more *westerly* than their summit. Had Roth and Fankhauser been on the Hasli Jungfrau, then Speer would have been on a more easterly point.

Against this is the detailed reference to the three peaks of the Wetterhörner made in the *Schweizerischer Beobachter* of July 17, 1845, and the *Intelligenzblatt für die Stadt Bern* of July 12, 1845,⁷ wherein it is stated that Roth and Fankhauser had climbed the highest point [as the Hasli Jungfrau was sometimes thought to be], the lower summit, or Rosenhorn, having been climbed the year before, and the middle summit by an Englishman on July 8 [9] that year. Here, the naming of the Rosenhorn and the indication of Speer's ascent of the Mittelhorn are so clear that there can be no doubt that it is the Hasli Jungfrau that is being claimed for Roth and Fankhauser.

This being so, how was it that the claims of Roth and Fankhauser were ignored for nearly a century until the appearance of Egger's article in *Die Alpen*? Till then, the authorities were agreed that their attempt had failed; see Coolidge in Conway and Coolidge, *The Bernese Oberland*, vol. ii, pp. 107-10, in which he says that they stopped less than 100 metres below the summit; also see Coolidge's note in *A. J.* 17, p. 115, and Studer, *Panorama von Bern*, p. 233, and *Über Eis und Schnee*, 2nd edition, vol. i, p. 420. Neither Roth nor Fankhauser, nor any of their friends, made any effort to correct these misrepresentations, nor did they come forward to refute Wills's claim in 1854. Their silence in 1854 is just understandable, for they may not have heard of Wills's climb, or if they did, may not have appreciated the significance of the claims made for it. Or they may not have cared. Studer's

⁵ *A. J.* 17. 115.

⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 265.

⁶ *Die Alpen*, 1940, pp. 265-6.

statements also were not challenged. But it is most singular that Fankhauser could write on the subject to Dr. Dübi in 1898⁸ and yet, apparently, make no claim to a complete ascent. For then, at any rate, he was taking an interest in the matter, whatever he had felt in 1854.

When one adds that (i) no one seems to have seen their baton from Grindelwald ; (ii) Speer did not mention the handkerchief attached to the baton ; (iii) the further information promised in Egger's first extract (*Die Alpen*, 1940, p. 265) was never forthcoming ; (iv) the inexplicable silence of Bohren, who might have been expected to have preferred his own countrymen to have the honour, rather than a foreigner, Wills, to say nothing of wishing to claim the first ascent from Grindelwald for himself, since Grimsel guides had claimed the first ascent from Rosenlauh ; (v) the (presumed) conspiracy of silence on the part of the people of Grindelwald in 1854, leading Wills to think of his ascent as the first ; having regard to all these factors, it must be said that the claim of Roth and Fankhauser is not wholly satisfactory, though it may be true.

Mere testimony in a newspaper is not conclusive (and the principal extracts quoted by Egger are not signed by Roth or Fankhauser, but appear to have been based on the information of an unknown contributor), for more than one definite claim has been declared untrue, both in the Alps and elsewhere (climbs on the Mönch and Mount McKinley occur to mind ; also Dr. Cook's claims to have reached the North Pole). The only positive evidence beyond these newspaper statements is that Speer saw a baton on the Hasli Jungfrau in 1845—and it has been shown above that this could have been one placed by Jaun, as the latter claimed, in 1844.

It has been objected to us that the annual rate of deposition of snow on the Hasli Jungfrau would militate against the baton being Jaun's from 1844 rather than Roth and Fankhauser's from 1845. No doubt there is a higher probability that a stick seen on a summit has been recently, rather than remotely, placed there ; but, Speer also saw a baton on the Rosenhorn and this must have been dating from 1844, so clearly a baton could have remained in position on the Hasli Jungfrau for a year. Girdlestone, indeed, in 1867, found Almer's fir-tree still on the Hasli Jungfrau, placed there thirteen years before⁹

We are unable, therefore, to consider that Roth and Fankhauser's claim to the first ascent of the Hasli Jungfrau from Grindelwald has been settled. Direct testimony, as lawyers know full well, is not necessarily to be preferred to indirect ; circumstances, it is sometimes said, cannot lie, whereas witnesses both can and do. This does not mean that we think that either Roth or Fankhauser was lying ; but we do say that when a claim is made, after nearly a century of denial (implicit or explicit), that claim should be able to meet reasonable objections. And it does not seem reasonable that Roth, a doctor in Interlaken, should either himself, or his friends for him, have taken no notice of Wills's claim, if not immediately, then at some later date (as

⁸ See S. A. C. *Jahrbuch*, 34th issue, p. 203.

⁹ Girdlestone : *The High Alps without Guides*, p. 103.

Speer did, after Wills's book had appeared). And we have already referred to the inexplicability of Fankhauser's silence, even when writing to Dr. Dübi on the subject.

If Wills really was—as he believed—the first to climb the Hasli Jungfrau from Grindelwald, the reactions of the villagers and others are explicable. Grindelwald turned out to welcome Wills on his return ; what imaginable reason was there for them to hatch a gigantic plot to conceal details of previous ascents which would have given the Swiss the honour of the first ascent from that side, as against a foreigner? Sooner or later someone would have given the show away. The whole notion seems quite fantastic and without a shred of evidence. The recipient of the telegram sent to Berne ; was he also in the secret? The members of the staff of the observatory at Berne, who brought their great telescope to bear on the summit ; were they, too, concerned in this monstrous hoax?

If the ascent had been made by Roth and Fankhauser with Peter Bohren and other guides, the villagers of Grindelwald must have known of it. Why, then, should Almer and Kaufmann have burdened themselves in 1854 with the famous fir-tree, unless they believed (and who could know better?) that Wills was, in fact, making the first ascent from that side? Is not Almer's character as well known to us as that of any guide? Would he have been a party to all this senseless deception?

(B) *E. J. Blackwell*. The evidence for Blackwell's climbs is :

(i) His entries, dated June 14, 1854, in the Führerbücher of Christian Bleurer and Peter Bohren, stating that he had made the ascent of 'the Wetterhorn' in a storm and had planted his flag on the highest point.

(ii) The testimony of W. G. Heathman¹⁰ in July 1854 that Christian Bleurer, with an enterprising Englishman, had lately reached the highest peak of the Wetterhorn, an ascent never previously accomplished. He adds that Murray's *Guide Book* said that it had been climbed by a young Scot some years before, but the guides all agreed that he had never reached the highest peak. It is obvious here that the young Scot referred to was Speer. Heathman's testimony is of great importance and we will refer to it in more detail at a later point.

Heathman goes on to say that Blackwell's first ascent, by the Upper Grindelwald glacier, had failed. Blackwell later, in Chamonix, told him that his successful ascent was by the Rosenloui glacier which proved 'far more laborious and punishing' than the former ; that they took about ten hours for the ascent, and left an alpenstock on the summit as a token of victory, and that just as they began to descend, the whole mass of ice round the peak began to crack and settle.

Dr. de Beer concludes that (i) Blackwell made an unsuccessful attempt on the Hasli Jungfrau from Grindelwald on June 13 but was defeated by bad weather and reached some other point which cannot be identified with certainty. Pfarrer Strasser, in *Der Gletschermann*,

¹⁰ W. G. Heathman : *Switzerland in 1854* (London, 1855), pp. 131-3.

Grindelwald, 1888, states that it was the Rosenhorn, but de Beer leaves the matter open. It has been suggested to us that the shoulder of the Mittelhorn (see picture in *Die Alpen*, 1949) is more likely to have been the point attained than the Rosenhorn, and we are of the same opinion. (ii) Towards the end of June, Blackwell went round to Rosenlauri, and from there, with the same guides, succeeded in climbing the Hasli Jungfrau.

The testimony regarding Blackwell's climbs is somewhat vague. He himself claimed to have ascended the highest peak, which de Beer states was at that time held to be the Hasli Jungfrau.¹¹ It would be interesting to know what real evidence there is for the Hasli Jungfrau being generally regarded as the highest summit; we suggest that it is through too ready an acceptance of this statement that a satisfactory explanation of the early climbs on the Wetterhörner has not been reached.

Speer, for example, was aware that the Hasli Jungfrau was not the highest peak, since he refers¹² to the 'untrodden summit of the central or great peak of the Wetterhorn,' which is clearly the Mittelhorn or highest summit. Wills wrote: 'Whether this [the Hasli Jungfrau] or the Mittelhorn be the higher, is a point as to which some doubts have been entertained.'¹³

Berlepsch cannot be regarded as good evidence, for though he writes of Jaun and Bannholzer as being said to have reached 'the highest point,' he shows in a footnote that he regards their peak as distinct from that climbed by Wills, which last he simply calls 'the northern and most difficult point.'¹⁴

We would also mention that at the end of Peter Michel's Führerbuch is a list of the heights of various peaks and passes, headed 'Eidgen. trigonometr. Vermessung 1851,' and among the mountains named are:—

Wetterhorn (Haslijungfrau)	12343'.
Mittelhorn	12360'.
Rosenhorn	12300'.

The date, 1851, is important; here is proof that three years before Blackwell's expeditions, the Mittelhorn was recognised as the highest of the three peaks.

It is remarkable that the inference from Heathman's statement that Blackwell had climbed the highest point, which the young Scot (Speer) had attempted earlier, does not appear ever to have been drawn. Speer's ascent was not necessarily denied by the guides because they considered the Hasli Jungfrau to be the highest peak, but, far more probably, because no guides from Grindelwald took part in the expedition. As if to drive home his point and make it clear beyond any shadow of doubt, Heathman adds a footnote in which he states that there were three peaks on the Wetterhorn; the two lower had been more than

¹¹ de Beer, p. 47. See also p. 49.

¹² *A.J.* 17. 106.

¹³ Wills: *Wanderings among the High Alps*, p. 274.

¹⁴ H. Berlepsch: *The Alps* (trans. Leslie Stephen, 1861), p. 230.

once ascended, but the highest, by far the most difficult, had never, till Blackwell's climb, been reached. Now Heathman obtained his information from Blackwell and it is evident that in the opinion of these two, the only unclimbed peak of the Wetterhörner in 1854 (Speer's ascent not being accepted) was the Mittelhorn and they were both aware that it was the highest summit.

Egger quotes an extract from the *Schweizerischer Beobachter* No. 84¹⁵ about Speer's ascent. It is significant that this states that Speer undertook with complete success the ascent of the Wetterhorn 'considered until now as impossible' and that at 1 o'clock in the afternoon he reached 'the highest summit.' This was quite correct, both the lower peaks having been already climbed, and it was only in the next issue of the paper that there was a complete change of opinion and the Hasli Jungfrau became the highest peak because, we suggest, this was the summit claimed to have been reached by Roth and Fankhauser and their expedition was undertaken with the deliberate intention of forestalling the foreigner, Speer.

It would seem evident that the summit attempted by Blackwell from Grindelwald on June 13, 1854, was not the Hasli Jungfrau. Studer says that the baton placed by Blackwell on this unsuccessful attempt was seen from Grindelwald on a 'point behind and clearly lower than the Mittelhorn.'¹⁶ This suggests either the prominent shoulder of the Mittelhorn shown in the picture in *Die Alpen* 1949, already referred to, or, as opined by Strasser, the Rosenhorn.¹⁷ Even in the worst weather it would scarcely be possible to arrive on the shoulder of the Mittelhorn or the summit of the Rosenhorn in mistake for the Hasli Jungfrau, particularly with a guide, Peter Bohren, who was supposed to have already ascended the latter peak with Roth and Fankhauser. We are of the opinion that Blackwell set out from Grindelwald on June 13 with the intention of climbing the Mittelhorn, which he knew to be the highest summit and which, so far as he was aware, had never previously been ascended.

Heathman tells us that Blackwell went round to Rosenlauri and successfully ascended the same peak on which he had failed from Grindelwald. Having regard to the indications of that peak to which we have referred above, the natural inference would be that Blackwell had successfully climbed the Mittelhorn from Rosenlauri, though the Rosenhorn is a possible, but improbable, alternative. His statement to Heathman that the whole mass of ice round the summit began to crack and settle does not sound like the Rosenhorn, but fits better with the Mittelhorn.

If Blackwell had ever ascended the Hasli Jungfrau and planted his flag or baton there, it is pertinent to point out that his mark was not seen from Grindelwald (save in so far as Studer says it was behind and

¹⁵ *Die Alpen*, op. cit., p. 265.

¹⁶ Studer: *Über Eis und Schnee*, 2nd edition, vol. 1, p. 423.

¹⁷ The Rosenhorn cannot be seen from Grindelwald itself, whereas the Mittelhorn is visible.

lower than the Mittelhorn), and that Wills, three months after Blackwell, found no baton on the summit of the Hasli Jungfrau, whilst the 'flag just like ours' that he did notice ten feet below the summit was not, apparently, of the type said to have been left by Blackwell. Wills's words, 'just like ours' suggest that the mark was another iron *flagge* like the immortal one transported by Lauener and Balmat. Well, it is not impossible that two such *flagges* were carried up the same mountain within a few weeks of one another, but the coincidence would be remarkable indeed. Wills, it may be added, also uses the word *drapeau* about this lower flag,¹⁸ so the words 'just like ours' are susceptible of a variant interpretation.

Furthermore, Heathman believes that the peak climbed by Blackwell was the same one *claimed* by Speer, and this was certainly the Mittelhorn, the true highest summit of the Wetterhörner. In face of all these indications, the one summit that does *not* appear to have been climbed by Blackwell was the Hasli Jungfrau.

There is also the (indirect) evidence of Peter Bohren. Of all the people connected with the early ascents of the Wetterhorn, none is so enigmatic as Peter Bohren. He was one of the guides of Roth and Fankhauser, of Dupontavice de Heussey, and of Wills. He was a Grindelwald man, and in view of the jealousies existing, might be expected to claim any possible distinction for Grindelwald as against the guides of Rosenlauri or the Grimsel. The first actual ascents of all three peaks of the Wetterhörner had been made by non-Grindelwald guides—the Rosenhorn on August 28, 1844; the Hasli Jungfrau on August 31, 1844; and the Mittelhorn on July 9, 1845. The one outstanding problem appeared to be the Hasli Jungfrau from Grindelwald.

That a spirit of rivalry existed is undoubted; we gather it from Speer, from Heathman, and from Wills, and the famous incident of Almer and the fir-tree was only the latest expression of it. Bohren's record as a guide is known; his *Führerbuch* is extant, and he had a long and distinguished career. Apart from one or two indications that he was rather a thirsty fellow (but in this he was like not a few other guides of those days) we know nothing against him. Blackwell, though Christian Bleurer was his favourite guide, said he was 'mainly indebted for success' on his ascent to Bohren; Dupontavice de Heussey says almost as much; Wills, too, praises him. His later climbing record is quite in keeping and it was not without good reason that Sir Felix Schuster wrote of him that 'he did as much as any man to create and maintain a high standard in his profession.'¹⁹ In Murray's *Guide Book* (10th edition, 1863), he is described as 'perhaps the best' guide in Grindelwald. It is difficult to believe, without much more precise evidence than we have, that he was a liar and deceiver of the first magnitude.

Wills²⁰ says 'Bohren had been three times this season to the plateau out of which the peaks of the Wetterhörner spring.' In his letter to his mother Wills describes Bohren as 'a man who had been up three times

¹⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 303.

²⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 272.

¹⁹ *A.J.* II. 44.

before this year to other peaks of the Wetterhorn.' Since we know, *vide* Heathman, that Blackwell had made two expeditions that year; and since Dupontavice de Heussey had certainly made one a little later, the three expeditions referred to by Wills are accounted for. So far, then, we find nothing against Bohren.

When Wills was at Interlaken on September 15, 1854, he was informed by Ulrich Lauener that no previous ascent had been made of the Hasli Jungfrau, meaning, from Grindelwald. Bohren, whom Wills engaged at Grindelwald on Lauener's request, did not contradict this. Why, if he had already ascended the Hasli Jungfrau, did he keep silent? De Beer seems to regard him as wholly untrustworthy, but his silence is far more intelligible if we assume that Lauener's statement was correct. Is it credible that the Grindelwald men should be more concerned to attribute the first ascent of the Hasli Jungfrau from their own village to an Englishman, Wills, rather than to two Swiss climbers, Roth and Fankhauser? If, as is generally agreed, there was rivalry between the Grindelwald and Grimsel guides, is it intelligible that Bohren, the one man of Grindelwald who could rival the achievements of J. Jaun, should remain silent, when he was, according to de Beer's arguments, the sole man living who had climbed the Hasli Jungfrau from *both* directions (with Roth and Fankhauser from Grindelwald and with Blackwell from Rosenloui), to say nothing of having made the second ascent of the Mittelhorn (with Dupontavice de Heussey)?

It is understandable that a man might lie in order to accord himself fame: Wills met such a man in Grindelwald.²¹ But, if Bohren had in fact taken part in previous ascents of the Hasli Jungfrau, it is scarcely credible that he should remain silent, as de Beer requires that he does, since by doing so he would only be detracting from his own fame.

Why did Blackwell not record his two climbs in his guides' Führerbücher? His attempt from Grindelwald was made in bad weather and our view is that when Blackwell returned from the expedition he had every reason to believe that he had reached the summit of the Mittelhorn, which he knew to be the highest of the three peaks; consequently he made appropriate entries in the guides' books. Later, when the weather cleared, he learned that his baton was not on the summit of the Mittelhorn, but only on the shoulder, and he decided to make another attempt from Rosenloui. When, at last, he reached the summit of the Mittelhorn (the *same* peak, be it noted, which he had attempted, and which he had so nearly succeeded in climbing, from Grindelwald) would it have been so very strange for him to have reasoned that, having already in all good faith recorded the ascent, there would be little point in making a second entry in the Führerbücher to a record a success which he had already described? The absence of such an entry supports our belief that Blackwell, in both his expeditions, was on the same peak, the Mittelhorn. De Beer's explanation differs in only one respect from ours, viz. that he thinks Blackwell,

²¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 302.

having failed on one peak, succeeded in climbing another, though Heathman's testimony does not support this view.

We have set out our reasons for concluding that Blackwell ascended the Mittelhorn and was never at any time on the Hasli Jungfrau, but there are two further points which should not be overlooked. Blackwell told Heathman that the Rosenloui route was 'far more laborious and punishing' than that from Grindelwald. This hardly sounds like the Hasli Jungfrau; the two routes converge at the Sattel, so there is nothing to choose there, and the Rosenloui route (which was not unknown by 1854) is not generally regarded as harder than that from Grindelwald.

In general, if a man fails on a peak from one direction and desires to attempt it from another, one would not expect him on the second attempt to go and climb a totally different peak. Since all the evidence points to Blackwell's failure from Grindelwald having been on the Mittelhorn, the probability would be that he would try the same peak from Rosenloui.

The consideration we have given to the numerous conflicting testimonies and inferences concerning these early attempts on the Wetterhorn leads us to the conclusions :

(i) That the claim of Roth and Fankhauser to have made the first ascent of the Hasli Jungfrau from Grindelwald, though possible, is non-proven, and raises more conundrums than it settles.

(ii) That Blackwell did not attempt or climb the Hasli Jungfrau from either Grindelwald or Rosenloui.

(iii) That Blackwell made an unsuccessful attempt on the Mittelhorn from Grindelwald on June 13, 1854, and subsequently ascended that peak from Rosenloui.

(iv) That Wills was probably justified in regarding his ascent as being the first from Grindelwald.

NOTE: For the question of Speer's reputed attempt on the Wetterhorn in 1843, see the note on p. 536 here. I should like to add that the arguments given in the interesting paper above do not convince me that Blackwell attempted the Mittelhorn from Grindelwald in 1854. I think that the balance of available evidence supports the traditional view that Blackwell virtually ascended the Hasli Jungfrau from Grindelwald on that occasion, and reached the actual top from Rosenloui a few days later.—T. GRAHAM BROWN.