

THE SWISS PIONEERS

By ARNOLD LUNN

FIFTY years ago the belief that Wills' ascent of the Wetterhorn was 'the first sporting climb' was firmly established in the folklore of our Club, and I did myself no good as a young man by debunking this pious legend in my book, *The Alps*. By 'sporting climb' was presumably meant a climb of which the main or only motive was mountain adventure rather than scientific research, but a climb does not cease to be 'sporting' because the climber also records in his description of the climb observations of scientific interest. Tyndall's first ascent of the Weisshorn was certainly a 'sporting' climb, and the claim of Father Placidus à Spescha to be regarded as the father of sporting mountaineering is not invalidated by the fact that he was interested in science, particularly in geology, and records occasional scientific observations in his narratives of mountain adventure.

It is significant that Professor T. Graham Brown, F.R.S., distinguished both as a mountaineer and as a scientist, should describe Father Placidus, in his chapter on 'Early Mountaineering' in the Lonsdale Library *Mountaineering*, as 'perhaps the first of the true mountaineers'. Nobody can read his mountaineering writings without realising that he loved not only mountains but also mountaineering, and that he was particularly interested in the ascent of virgin peaks. He did not belong to the 'one man-one mountain' school. Between 1788 and 1824 he had nine climbing seasons to his credit, in the course of which he made the first ascents of the Stockgron (11,214 ft.), the Piz Urlaun (11,063 ft.), the Rheinwaldhorn (11,149 ft.), the highest summit overlooking the sources of the Hinter Rhine, the Güferhorn (11,132 ft.), the second highest summit in that region, the Oberalpstock (10,932 ft.), the highest point near Disentis, the Piz Aul, Piz Scharboden and Piz Terri, and he organised and took part in the first ascent of the Tödi (11,887 ft.), the monarch of the Glarus Alps. From a gap a thousand feet below the summit he watched his companions reach the top. Disentis is in the Grisons which was then allied to, and which is now a Canton of, Switzerland.

Neither Douglas Freshfield, who wrote an article on Father Placidus for the *Alpine Journal* (vol. 10. 289), nor Francis Gribble, who devoted a chapter to him in his book, *The Early Mountaineers*, in which this Benedictine monk is described as a friar, made a serious attempt to

understand Father Placidus or his ecclesiastical milieu. He was a genuine eccentric. When the armies of revolutionary France invaded Switzerland they were only welcomed by the more extreme radicals, and nowhere was the hatred of the Jacobins, who had crowned a prostitute as the goddess of Reason in the cathedral of Notre Dame de Paris, more intense than in Catholic Switzerland. It is therefore not surprising that Father Placidus infuriated many of his fellow monks by admitting to a certain sympathy with the French revolutionaries, the forerunners of modern communists, and he certainly did not disarm the more conservative of his fellow monks by attacking clerical celibacy and by criticising the strict obedience demanded of monks by their ecclesiastical superiors. He was, in fact, an eighteenth century equivalent of a character composed in unequal parts of Father Küng and Dr. Hewlett Johnson, and it is absurd for Freshfield and Gribble to represent him as the victim of ecclesiastical persecution. This does him too little justice, for what was remarkable about Father Placidus was his success in getting away with eccentric views. Such, indeed, was the Benedictine respect for his contributions to science, geology and the mapping of mountains, and perhaps also for his mountaineering, that he was criticised but never molested. He was never interfered with in his climbing plans, and was allowed to end his days as a parish priest, a life which he preferred to that of a monk.

Three remarkable citizens of Geneva made a notable contribution to mountaineering history, Jean André de Luc (1727-1817), Marc Théodore Bourrit (1739-1819) and Horace Benedict de Saussure (1740-1799).

De Luc, like his father before him, was an active member of the Popular Party. His public career was distinguished, for he was a member of the Grand Council of Geneva, but his main interests were scientific rather than political. He invented the hygrometer, and his scientific reputation was such that he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society after he had established himself in London. He died in Windsor at the age of ninety.

De Luc was an enthusiastic mountain traveller and the first to climb the Buet, the ascent being made from Sixt on September 22, 1770. He made a second ascent in 1772 by a different route from the valley of Anterne.

Marc Théodore Bourrit was by birth a *natif* of Geneva, a fact that certainly influenced his relations with the patrician de Saussure. At an early age he obtained an appointment as Precentor in the Cathedral choir, supplementing his income by painting miniatures. He was twenty-two when he first discovered his passion for the Alps. 'It was', he writes, 'from the summit of the Voirons that the view of the Alps first awoke in me a desire to become acquainted with them'. He had made the fortunate discovery that it was easier at Geneva to sell

mountain landscapes than portraits. 'We are often agreeably surprised', writes Douglas Freshfield, 'at the accuracy of topographical detail attained in such difficult subjects as the chain of Mont Blanc from the Allée Blanche, still more at the power and vigour in many of the blotted-in sketches of individual peaks.'

It was Bourrit's practice to climb in summer and write up his journeys in the winter. His *Description des Glacières*, first published in 1773, was translated two years later into English, and went through three English editions. Frederick the Great wrote to him and dubbed him 'The Historian of the Alps', a title of which he was inordinately proud. He received his visitors in a house which, so he tells us, 'was embellished with beautiful acacias planted for the comfort and convenience of strangers who do not wish to leave Geneva without visiting the Historian of the Alps'. As a historian he had many faults, but he had one redeeming virtue, an unbounded enthusiasm for his subject. His enduring love for the mountains remained the central passion of his life.

As a mountaineer Bourrit deserved perhaps more success than he achieved. He made in 1775 the first ascent of the Buet from Vallorcine. He repeated the expedition six times, convincing evidence of the fact that he did not only climb mountains for prestige. Indeed, one criterion of whether a man climbs for fun or merely to collect peaks, in the spirit in which other men collect challenge cups, is his readiness to repeat ascents. The great ambition of Bourrit's life was to climb Mont Blanc. In 1785 he and his son joined de Saussure in an attempt on Mont Blanc via the Aiguille du Goûter, but retreated about 600 ft. below the summit of the Aiguille. Bourrit's last attempt on Mont Blanc, in 1788, only just fell short of success. He started with an Englishman, Woodley, and a Dutchman, Camper, but only the Englishman and his guide reached the top. Bourrit abandoned the attempt at the last rocks, about 400 ft. below the summit.

Bourrit would have found it difficult to be generous to the first man who had achieved what had been the supreme ambition of his life, the first ascent of Mont Blanc, even if the victor had been de Saussure, the patrician, or a guide, but that the victor was Dr. Paccard, an amateur mountaineer and a mere village doctor, was more than he could bear. It was Bourrit who was the originator of the monstrous legend that it was Balmat who discovered the route and led throughout, a legend that was the exact reverse of the truth.

And this was not the only distortion of Alpine history of which Bourrit was guilty. Exchaquet, the director of the mines at Servoz, forestalled Bourrit's ambition to be the first traveller to cross the Col du Géant. Bourrit in his narrative of his own crossing of the Col du Géant never refers to Exchaquet. When criticised for his omission he replied that he had mentioned the two guides who crossed the pass twenty-four

hours before Exchaquet and recognised no obligation to refer to anybody else. The fact is that this further offence against the historian's code by the 'Historian of the Alps' was motivated by the same insane jealousy of any amateur who had enjoyed success, which had inspired his attack on Paccard.

Bourrit lived to the age of eighty. It may be true, as Forbes remarked, that Bourrit in his Alpine writings 'conveys the simplest facts through a medium of unmixed bombast'; it is no less true that Bourrit was, as Sir Gavin de Beer writes, 'one of the first writers to find something to say about the Alps other than that they were high or beautiful'. The pluck and pertinacity which he displayed in his determination to become a climber did him great credit. He made many converts by his writings, and rendered great service by his guide-books to Chamonix. His attack on Paccard was disgraceful, but there is enough on the credit side to entitle him to a definite place among the pioneers of the Alps.

Horace Benedict de Saussure was by birth a member of one of the leading families of Geneva. His interest in mountaineering was almost exclusively scientific. He makes no comment on one of the loveliest of Alpine views, the Jungfrau from the Wengernalp, or on the Wetterhorn from Rosenloui, that favourite theme of the early mountain artists from Lory to Calame, and one bald sentence suffices to record his impression of the Matterhorn.

De Saussure made the third ascent of Mont Blanc, and spent sixteen days of scientific research on the Col du Géant. None of his contemporaries or predecessors had travelled more extensively in the Alps. His glacier expeditions include Mont Blanc, the Col du Géant, the little Mont Cervin, the Théodule Pass and the Zäsenberg above Grindelwald.

Douglas Freshfield's life of de Saussure is uncritical of his hero, and *The First Ascent of Mont Blanc* by Sir Gavin de Beer and Professor Graham Brown had an erosive effect on my respect not only for de Saussure but also for Freshfield. *The First Ascent of Mont Blanc* is a model of Alpine scholarship, particularly in its treatment of Bourrit's monstrous attempt to prove that Balmat was the real hero of the first ascent. The authors apportion blame very justly between Bourrit and de Saussure. They write:

'One man, Professor de Saussure, could have killed the myth at its very beginning, and should have done so Perhaps he had let his jealousy of Dr. Paccard override his conscience, or political expedience frame his relations with Bourrit, but whatever may have been the factors which moved him, it is not easy to forgive the way in which he finally condoned Bourrit's attack so that he may almost be said to have supported it.'

The facts on which de Beer and Graham Brown base their verdict were known to Freshfield but evaded in his too flattering portrait of de Saussure.

Louis Agassiz, the famous scientist, was a pioneer of glaciology rather than of mountaineering. He spent five years studying glacier motion on the Unteraar glacier near the Grimsel. During these five summers Agassiz only made two mountain ascents, the second ascent of the Wetterhorn (the first by an amateur) and the fourth of the Jungfrau.

Swiss mountaineers dominated the first half of the nineteenth century, and a great impetus was given to mountaineering by the splendid achievements of the Meyer family of Aarau. The Meyers were a family of well-to-do Aarau merchants. John Rudolf Meyer the first (1739-1813) climbed the Titlis above Engelberg in 1787, and crossed many of the lower passes, such as the Scheidegg, Grimsel and Furka. He must have been impressed by the inadequacy of the existing maps of the glacier regions and ambitious to improve on them. What is certain is that he financed the publication of an atlas which contained by far the finest maps of the High Alps that had appeared until then. It was, indeed, one of Meyer's map-surveyors, Herr Weiss from Strasbourg, who was the first to reach the summit of the Oberaarjoch (10,607 ft.).

On August 3, 1811, J. R. Meyer the second (1768-1825) and his brother Hieronymus made the first ascent of the Jungfrau. Not surprisingly, their story was received with scepticism, and it was therefore necessary to repeat the ascent. In 1812 Rudolf (1791-1833) and Gottlieb (1793-1829), sons of J. R. Meyer the second, carried out some remarkable expeditions in the Oberland glaciers. Rudolf Meyer reached the Gemslücke on the South-east ridge of the Finsteraarhorn and his guides claimed to have completed the ascent, a claim regarded by most Alpine historians as unfounded. On September 3 Gottlieb Meyer, who had joined his brother, made the second ascent of the Jungfrau. On the same day his brother Rudolf made the first authentic and certain crossing of the Strahlegg pass. The story of these remarkable climbs is told in *Reise auf den Jungfrau-Gletscher und Ersteigung seines Gipfels* and *Reise auf die Eisgebirge des Kantons Bern und Ersteigung ihrer höchsten Gipfel im Sommer 1812*.

The Meyers were certainly outstanding among the pioneers of mountaineering. Captain J. P. Farrar paid them a deserved tribute in the *Alpine Journal* (vol. 27. 295):

'It has often seemed to me', he writes, 'that the craft of mountaineering, and even more the art of mountaineering description, distinctly retrograded for over fifty years after these great expeditions of the Meyers. It is not until the early 'sixties that rocks of equal difficulty are again attacked. Even then—witness Almer's opinion as to the inaccessibility of the Matterhorn—men had not yet learned the axiom,

which Alexander Burgener was the first, certainly by practice rather than by explicit enunciation, to lay down, viz, that the practicability of rocks is only decided by actual contact. Meyer's guides had a glimmering of this. It is again not until the 'sixties that Meyer's calm yet vivid descriptions of actualities are surpassed by those brilliant articles of Stephen, of Moore, of Tuckett, and by Whymper's great "Scrambles", that are the glory of this Journal and of English mountaineering.'

Professor Franz Joseph Hugi (1796-1855), a Soleure geologist, was a teacher of science by profession. On August 10, 1829, Hugi took part in what was almost certainly the first ascent of the Finsteraarhorn. Hugi remained on the Gemslücke and two of his guides, Jakob Leuthold and Johannes Währen, built a cairn, remnants of which were found when the second ascent was made in 1842. Hugi was the father of winter mountaineering, the first to penetrate into the High Alps in winter. On January 14, 1832, he reached the summit of the Strahlegg pass, on the 16th he made an attempt on the Mönchjoch and penetrated as far as the plateau below the Bergli rocks, and on the 18th he reached a point just below the Finsteraarjoch when the weather broke.

Gottlieb Studer (1804-1890) was undoubtedly the most eminent mountaineer of the first half of the century. His mountaineering career, which began in 1823, and which ended sixty years later in 1883, included no less than 643 distinct expeditions. Studer was essentially a mountain explorer rather than a specialist in the first ascent of difficult mountain peaks. He did make a number of first ascents of comparatively easy peaks, such as the Diablerets, and the first crossing of a number of easy glacier passes, but the conquest of difficult peaks for the sake of conquest did not appeal to him. He owes his distinguished place in Alpine history less to the numerous climbs which he made than to his outstanding contribution to our knowledge of the Swiss Alps. He drew no less than 710 mountain panoramas, by far the best mountain panoramas produced until then, and his two maps of the southern valleys of the Valais (1849 and 1853) were surprisingly good for the period. Finally, his comprehensive history of mountaineering in the Swiss Alps, *Ueber Eis und Schnee*, first issued in four volumes (1869-83), has proved invaluable to all subsequent Alpine historians.

Yet another distinguished Swiss pioneer with a fine record was J. Coaz who began as a forest inspector and made a number of first ascents in Eastern Switzerland, among them the Piz Kesch, the Piz Corvatsch, and Il Chapütschin. His greatest triumph was the first ascent on September 13, 1850, of the Piz Bernina.

Up to and including 1850 the following first ascents were made by all-Swiss parties: Titlis, Mont Velan, Dent du Midi, Dent de Morcles, Rheinwaldhorn, Uri Rothstock, Oberalpstock, Jungfrau, Finsteraarhorn, Tödi, Altels, Oldenhorn, Sustenhorn, Wildhorn, Hasle Jungfrau

(Wetterhorn), Il Chapütschin, Piz Corvatsch, Piz Misaun and Piz Bernina. The Lauteraarhorn, the Rosenhorn peak of the Wetterhorn and the Ewigschneehorn were first climbed by Edouard Desor, a German, with Swiss guides.

Prior to 1850 the Swiss had incomparably the best record of the mountaineers of any country, not only for mountaineering but also for their contribution to our knowledge of the mountains. Josias Simler published in 1574 the first text book on mountain craft, which was later brought up to date by Father Placidus. Gruner's *Die Eisgebirge des Schweizerlandes* which was published in 1760 was the best book up to then on the region of the Alpine glaciers. Father Placidus produced some excellent maps. Agassiz might be described as the father of modern glaciology, and Studer as the father of mountaineering history. Finally, General Dufour published between 1845 and 1865 twelve sheets of the famous Dufour map of the Swiss Alps.

Naturally the Swiss can hardly be congratulated on being the first to produce maps of their own mountains and glaciers, but the Dufour map was at the time the best mountain map produced by any country, and in some respects a model for all succeeding mountain maps. In honour of General Dufour the Swiss Government in 1863 named the highest point of Monte Rosa the Dufourspitze.

Such was the position in 1850, but within a few years the initiative had passed from the Swiss to the British. Let us not forget, however, that the British pioneers were very dependent on their guides, the greatest of whom were Swiss. It was not until this century that Swiss amateurs such as Gustav Hasler, Hans Lauper, Alfred Zürcher, André Roch, Ernst Feuz and Marcel Kurz, greatest of ski-mountaineers, once again made an outstanding contribution to Alpine history. It is the Swiss Foundation for Alpine Research, founded by our Honorary Member, Karl Weber, in 1940, which deserves much of the credit for the splendid achievements of Swiss amateurs in the Andes and Himalaya.