

One hundred years ago

(with extracts from the *Alpine Journal*)

C. A. Russell

Winter, that uninvited but insistent visitor, often seems reluctant to leave and this was the case in 1873.

After a late spring the climbing season opened in unsettled weather, and parties arriving in the Dauphiné in early June found large quantities of fresh snow. One of these parties, including the Rev C. Taylor, and R. and W. M. Pendlebury, who had succeeded in climbing the E face of Monte Rosa during the previous year, attempted on 14 June to ascend the unclimbed Râteau, but were forced to retreat a short distance below the summit due to violent winds and ice-covered rocks. The party, a strong one accompanied by four guides including Peter Knubel and J. M. Lochmatter, had the consolation of making the second recorded ascent of the Pic Central of the Meije.

A slight improvement in the weather coincided with the arrival during the first week in July of Miss Meta Brevoort and W. A. B. Coolidge, who later in the month with Christian Almer and Peter Michel reached the summit of the Râteau by the SE ridge and made the first ascent of the Grande Ruine. On 17 July Coolidge, with Almer and Christian Roth, completed the first ascent of the Montagne des Agneaux, an interesting snow and ice route by way of the NW face.

In the Pennine Alps several new expeditions were recorded during July. Thomas Cox and Frederick Gardiner, with Peter Knubel and J. M. Lochmatter, made the first traverse of the Zinal Rothorn starting from the Trift glacier and descending to Zinal by Leslie Stephen's route. On the Grand Cornier the NW ridge was climbed for the first time by T. Bornand with Elias Peter.

82 *Grand Cornier from the north* Photo: C. A. Russell

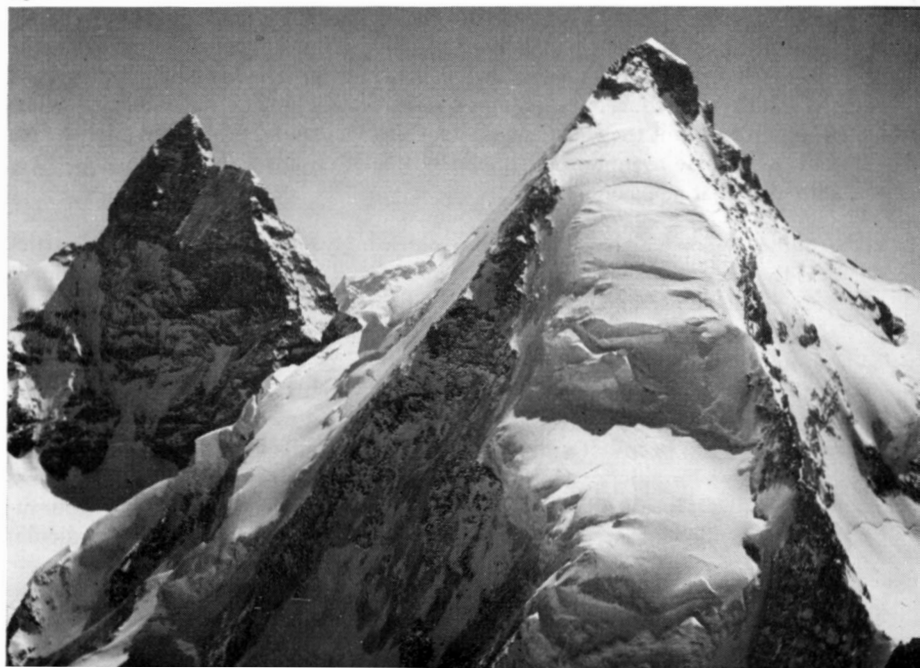


On 18 July an important new route was completed on the Dent d'Hérens, which had first been climbed by means of the sw flank ten years earlier. Leaving Breuil on the previous day A. Giles Puller, accompanied by J. J. and Pierre Maquignaz as guides and Emmanuel Maquignaz and Louis Carrel as porters, spent the night on a ridge of rocks bordering the glacier 'which is known locally as the Glacier de Mont Albert. Starting the next morning at 4am, they ascended first by a steep snow slope, and afterwards by the rocks to the right of the great couloir (visible from Val Tournanche) till, at 8.30am, they reached the summit of the ridge which divides Val Tournanche from the Zardezan glacier; the final peak of the Dent d'Hérens standing out clear immediately in front of them. Without descending, they crossed the head of the glacier on to the southern arête, and then cut straight across the great ice-slope, and reached the western arête overhanging the Tiefenmatten Glacier at a great elevation. The passage from the ice-slope on to the arête occupied considerable time, the rocks being both steep and difficult. At 2pm they reached the final arête, which was found to be extremely narrow, and touched the highest point at $\frac{1}{4}$ before 3pm: they descended by the western arête, the lower portion of which presented great difficulties, so that they did not get on to the upper level of the Zardezan glacier till nearly 9pm.'

The first ascent by way of the w ridge, a route still regarded as one which exacts a degree of experience, was a fine achievement on one of the more difficult peaks in the Zermatt region; more than 30 years were to elapse before the summit was reached by a complete ascent of the E ridge.

Although the indifferent weather continued throughout the summer another first ascent was recorded on 14 August when James Eccles, with M.-C. and

83 *The Dent d'Hérens and the Matterhorn* Photo: Swiss National Tourist Office

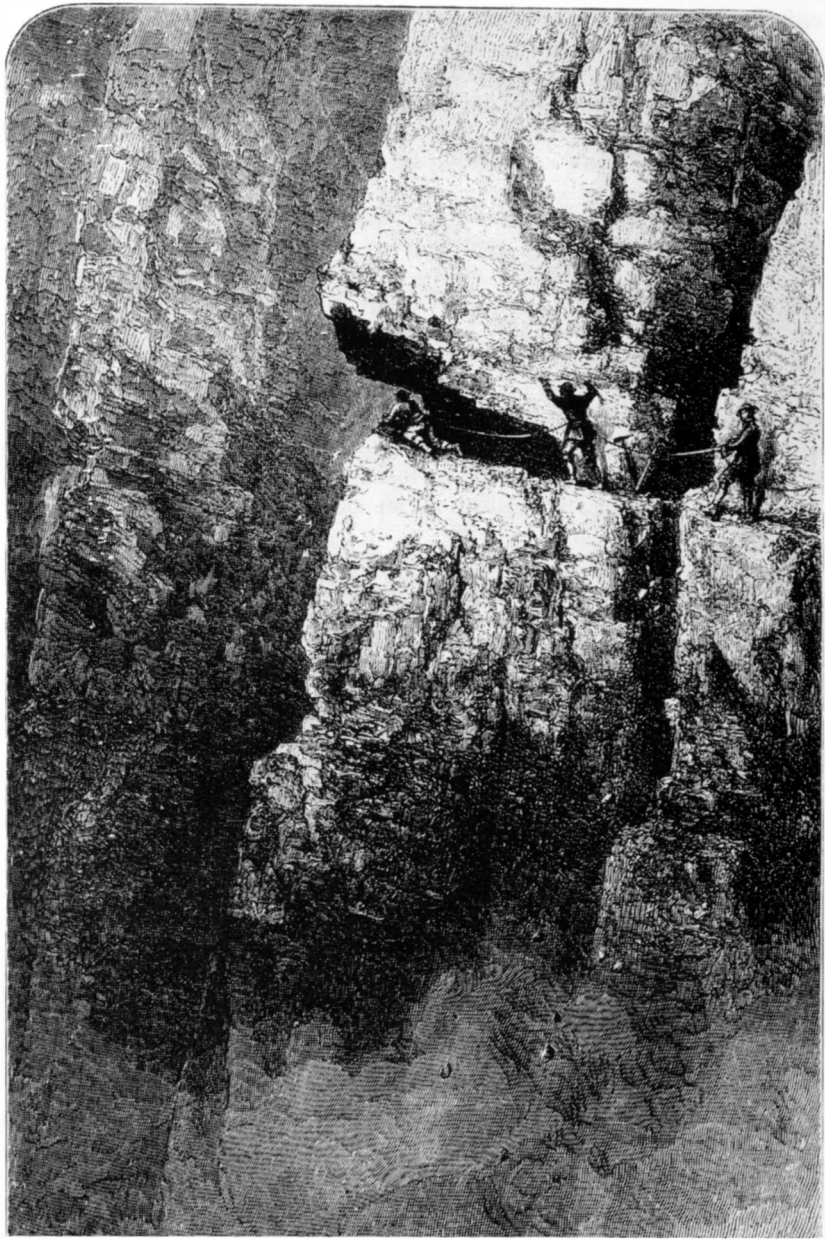


Alphonse Payot, reached the summit of the Aiguille de Rochefort. A few days later C. T. Dent, accompanied by G. A. Passingham and the guides Alexander Burgener and Franz Andermatten made the first of his many attempts on the Aiguille du Dru. In a paper read before the Alpine Club in the following year Dent recorded that he had long been tempted by the appearance of the peak to test the possibility of its ascent and that as a result of an initial investigation 'the north-western face, or the one visible from the Chamonix valley, was pronounced impossible. My original and private impression was that a way might be found up this. It was, therefore, pretty safe to infer that the opposite would be the case, and so it turned out. The conclusions arrived at from a survey of the other side were more favourable to our enterprise. We agreed, then, that our first assault should be made from the Glacier de la Charpoua.'

After recounting details of their experiences Dent went on to assess the prospects for future attempts. 'The experience of our two days' climbing on the peak led us to the conclusion that our general line of attack was the right one. I am sure that if the mountain is ever ascended it will be by this South face. On each occasion we were unable to study much the other parts of this side, owing to the peculiar character of the rocks, our climbing being chiefly in couloirs. It is extremely difficult to get from one part of the face to another when at any height without descending first, and I think it will only be by trying in succession from below the different parts of the face that a possible route will ultimately be found. The final peak, which from this side shoots up clearly defined from the great mass of the mountain, appeared tolerably easy of ascent, if one could only reach its base. A sort of depression extends three parts of the way round the base, and the edge of this moat seemed as far as we saw to be defended by an inaccessible belt of vertical rock. Some crack, however, must surely exist somewhere, though it will probably require close investigation and much perseverance to discover it. The rocks themselves are wholly unlike any I ever met with elsewhere. One is constantly brought to a standstill by great vertical slabs of rock, which are fitted together with the most irritatingly perfect accuracy. Progress upwards, when above the level of the middle of the face, necessitates a series of fatiguing gymnastics, like swimming up hill; but the rocks, where they are accessible, proved invariably firm and good. The mountain is singularly free from any danger, and it is sheer difficulty that stops one.'

Another region which was becoming increasingly popular with climbing parties was the Venetian Tyrol, and the *Alpine Journal* for November 1873 contains a very readable account by D. W. Freshfield of his ascent of the Pelmo, with C. C. Tucker and a local hunter, Augusto di Marco.¹ 'There is scarcely any summit in the Alps which from every point of view presents so formidable an appearance as the Pelmo. Time, and the various forces of nature, almost invariably create a breach in the defences of great mountains. Here, however, their work has been left unfinished. The upper cliffs are, it is true, broken on the east by a long slope, where, after a fresh fall, snow lies in such quantities as to show that it is easy of ascent. But this snow, when, as in spring, it has accumulated to a sufficient mass, falls from the bottom of the slope over a perpendicular

¹ The climb was made in 1872.



84 *On the Pelmo* (reproduced from *AJ* 6, November, 1873)

cliff of at least 1,000 feet in height. It is only at what may be called the northern cape of the bay formed by the whole South-east or Zoppè face of the mountain, that the ridge dividing the Campo di Rutorto from Val Ruton runs up, buttress-like, against the cliffs to a point not perhaps more than 400 or 500 feet lower than the bottom of the upper breach, but fully half a mile distant from it; and the cliffs along this half-mile are quite hopeless in appearance.

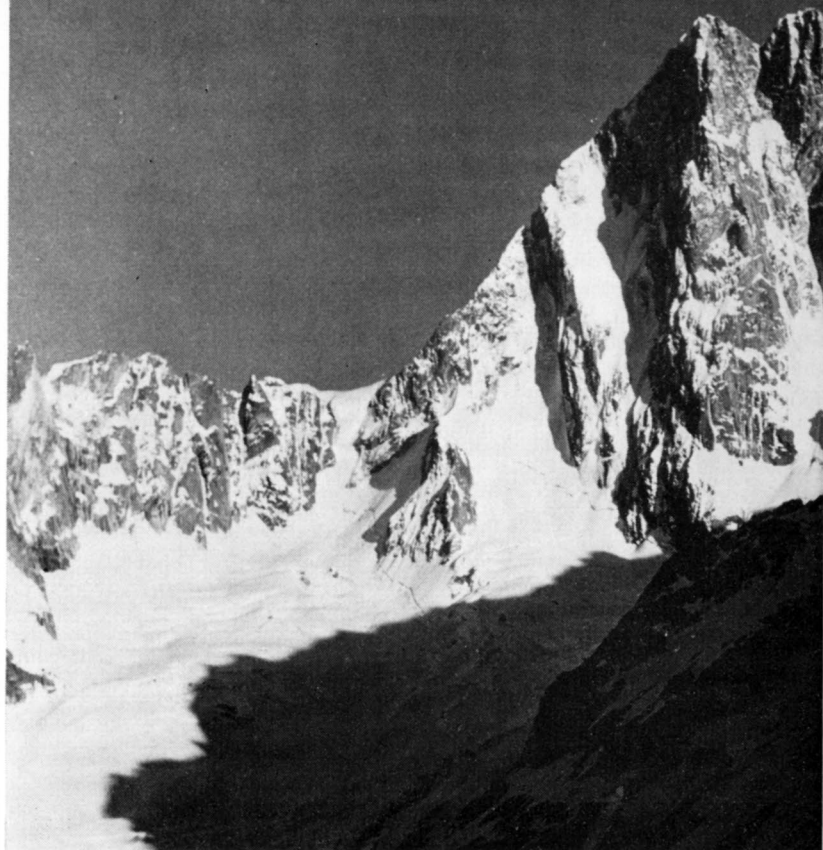
It was consequently with some surprise that we found ourselves climbing the buttress in question, and, as far as we could see, about to run our heads against the wall-like rocks on which it rested. On the last place where it could have found room to rest was a low pile of stones. Standing beside it, we began for the first time to comprehend the key to our dilemma; we were now to turn our faces to the left, and to attempt the formidable task of traversing the face of the Pelmo. Our pathway was before us, a horizontal ledge or groove, at present a few feet broad, shortly narrowing so as to afford only sufficient standing-ground, threatening before long not to do even this. The cliffs around us bent into deep recesses, and each time a projecting angle was reached, the side of the bay seen opposite appeared wholly smooth and impassable.

This portion of the ascent of the Pelmo is, in my limited experience, one of the most impressive, and at the same time enjoyable, positions in which a climber can find himself. Even a sluggish imagination has here enough to stimulate it. The mysterious pathway, unseen from a short distance, seems to open for the mountaineer's passage, and to close up again behind him as he advances. The stones he dislodges, after two or three long bounds, disappear with a whirr into a sheer depth of seething mist, of which the final far-off crash reveals the immensity. The overhanging rocks above, the absence of any resting-place even for the eye below, do not allow him for a moment to forget that the crags to which he clings form part of one of the wildest precipices in Europe.⁷

The conclusion to this summary of the events of one hundred years ago is provided by Leslie Stephen. With T. S. Kennedy and J. A. G. Marshall, who during their stay at Chamonix made the first ascent of the N peak of the Aiguille de Blaitière, Stephen and Gabriel Loppé, accompanied by the guides Johann Fischer, Ulrich Almer and Henri Devouassoud, completed the first traverse of 'one of the most conspicuous passes in the whole range of the Alps'. The following extract is taken from Stephen's account of the crossing of the pass on 14 July 1873.

'One incident, however, deserves fuller commemoration. As we began to climb the snow-slopes we observed at a little distance ahead certain mysterious objects arranged with curious symmetry in a circle upon the glacier. Some twenty black spots lay absolutely motionless before us; and as we approached we became aware of their nature, and not, as I will venture to add, without a certain feeling of sadness. In fact, we had before us a proof of the terrible power with which tempests sometimes rage in these upper regions. The twenty objects were corpses—not human corpses, which indeed, would in some sense have been less surprising. As a melancholy accident has lately shown,¹ man may easily be done

¹ Professor Fedchenko, a Russian traveller caught in a severe storm while attempting to reach the Col du Géant with a guide and a porter, had died of exhaustion on the Mer de Glace.



85 *Col des Hirondelles* Photo: C. D. Milner

to death by the icy winds which have such terrible power in these exposed wastes of snow. But the poor little bodies which lay before us were the mortal remains of swallows. How it came to pass that the little company had been struck down so suddenly as their position seemed to indicate gave matter for reflection. Ten minutes' flight with those strong wings would have brought them to the shelter of the Chamonix forests, or have taken them across the mountain wall to the congenial climate of Italy. Whether the birds had gathered together for warmth, or been stupefied so suddenly by the blasts as to be slain at once in a body, there they were, united in death, and looking, I confess, strangely pathetic in the midst of the snowy wilderness. I mention it here, not merely because none of us had met with such an incident before, but also for another purpose. First discoverers have, I believe, a right to christen their passes; but, unluckily or otherwise, it is one of those rights which is not very valuable, because it cannot be enforced. If future travellers choose to call the pass the *Col des Jorasses*, or the *Col de Léchaud*, we cannot exact any penalty from them. So far, however, as our authority is recognised, I beg to state that we in all due form passed a resolution declaring that henceforth the col which I am about to describe should be known to all whom it concerns by the sole style and title of the *Col des Hirondelles*.'

It is nice to think that the swallows have made such a lasting contribution to Alpine history.