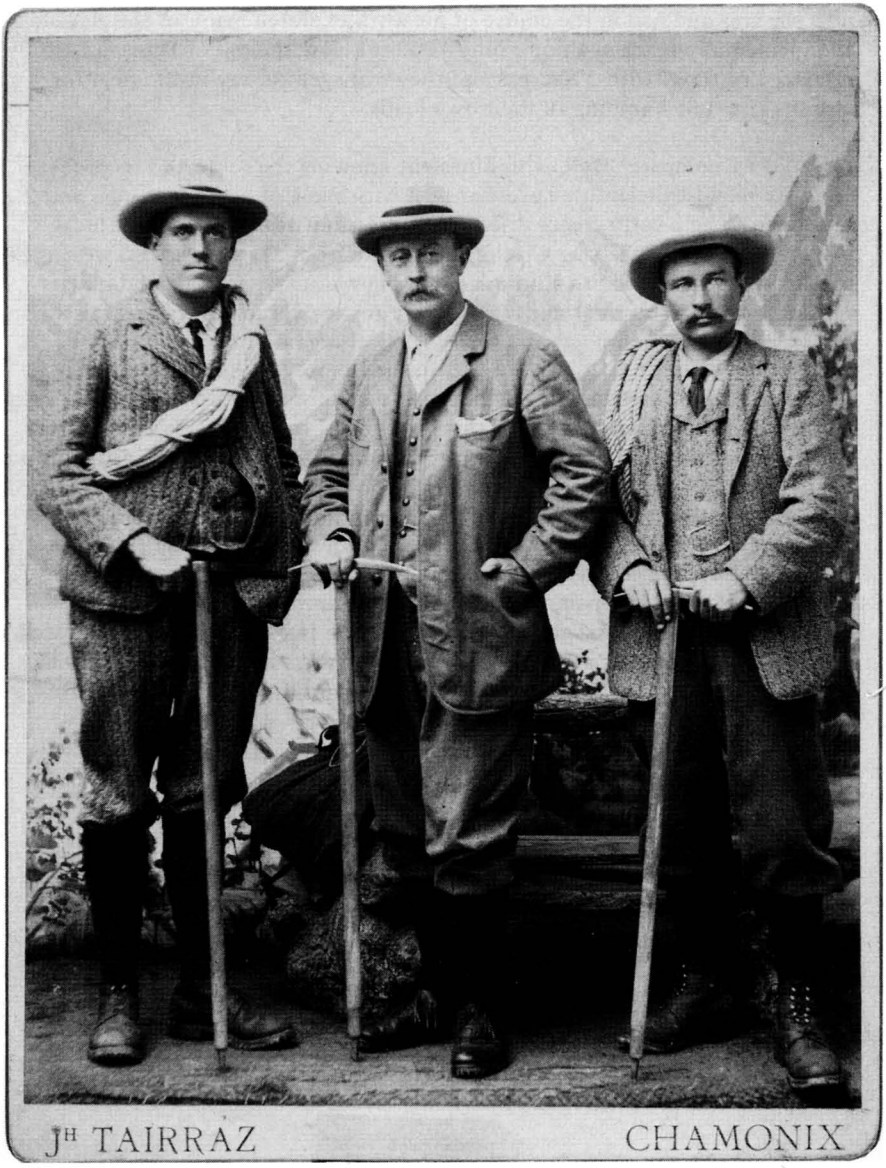


*55 Early portraiture. This and next photo: Joseph Tairraz*

# The Tairraz family of Chamonix—four generations of mountain photographers

Georges Tairraz
Translation: H. Pursey

In 1741 2 Englishmen, Windham and Pocock, set out on foot to explore the valley of Chamonix and made camp on the moraine at the foot of the Mer de Glace. Thus the English opened the glaciers of Mont Blanc to tourism, as has been noted among others by Paul Payot in his book—'Au Royaume du Mont Blanc'. By this expedition Windham and Pocock unveiled for the first time the beauties of the Mont Blanc massif, and helped to dispel the superstitious fear it had previously inspired, as witness and popular name 'Les Monts Maudits'. This first stage towards opening up the glaciers provided curiosity initially, and then the desire to know the most picturesque and finely proportioned mountains in the world.

By 1850 an ever increasing number of visitors, tourists, connoisseurs and artists was coming to Chamonix each summer. The ascent of Mont Blanc, whose summit was first conquered in 1786, became an eagerly sought after goal for many of them. Painters and engravers notably the English artists Atkin, William Pars, Cockburn and William Turner, set up their easels along the route to Mont Blanc. Their paintings, with marvellously involuted lines, still excite our admiration for the vision they offer of the peaks, the séracs and the crevasses which are portrayed with such passion and excitement.

Living in such a situation, it is not surprising that a young man from the valley, son of simple peasants, whom we would consider rough and illiterate even though well enough educated by the standards of the time, wished to make use of the new inventions of Niepce and Daguerre to photograph the landscapes surrounding him, which were then unknown to the world outside. The first Daguerrotypes made by my grandfather, Joseph Tairraz, in 1857 show his father and mother in their best Sunday clothes, and I am indeed fortunate in still having these old reproductions.

Subsequently the wet film process was invented and the photographic image greatly improved. At about this time my grandfather started to produce his first pictures of the district. His camera took 21 cm x 27 cm pictures, and it was with this equipment that he made the first photographs at the summit of Mont Blanc in about 1860. The sensitive plate in those days had to be coated with emulsion on site, because its light sensitivity only lasted for about an hour. It was therefore necessary to take along a special tent for use as a darkroom, and an ascent of Mont Blanc became something of an expedition.

The following is an extract from 'Au Royaume du Mont Blanc':

> 'A curious story is to be found in an article by Gabriel Franck ('Figaro', September 1861), which was told to him by a certain Monsieur Tairraz, Guide-Photographer. Apparently one Monsieur Bisson, photographer to

> the Emperor, Napoleon III, came down from Mont Blanc full of excitement at having taken 3 pictures while on the mountain, which he said he would not part with for 4000 francs. But when he saw my 7 pictures, he was so taken with them that he eventually bought them for 100,000 francs. This shows conclusively that the first photographic expedition on Mont Blanc was in fact made by the man from Chamonix, Joseph Tairraz.'

Views of the countryside cannot be allowed to override the needs of a large family, and Joseph Tairraz also established himself as a portrait photographer, taking many pictures of his friends and relatives as well as of the alpinists who wanted a lasting souvenir of their exploits. Unfortunately serious flooding of the stream which flows through Chamonix, following the rupture of a pocket of water under the Mer de Glace, carried away all these early pictures which had been carefully stored in the basement of the house, so destroying for ever these irreplaceable documents and archives, the loss of which causes me much pain and regret.

In about 1880, Georges Tairraz, my father, started helping my grandfather in his work and went off as an apprentice to one of the best-known Paris photographers, Pierre Petit. This apprenticeship, photography, laboratory work and re-touching, lasted 2 years. By his work, my father gained the confidence of his employer, who allowed him to take some of the more difficult pictures, such as a statue or monument in Paris which had to be photographed without stopping the traffic. Realising that the omnibuses were always on the move, he stopped his lens down to the point where an exposure of about an hour was required, so that moving objects, such as vehicles and inquisitive passers-by, were not recorded on the plate. When my father returned home he was able to exploit his new knowledge in the Tairraz 'Alpine Photographic Studio'.

Even though enlargers were then unknown, the public were offered pictures of ever-increasing size, and the photographer's equipment became more and more impressive. Formats of 24 cm x 30 cm or larger became common. My father did not hesitate to use a 50 cm x 60 cm format for high altitude pictures. A photographic expedition on Mont Blanc with such equipment needed a dozen or more porters, the objective alone, which we guarded so carefully, weighing 8 kg.

It was at this time that a major advance occurred. The silver bromide emulsion, similar to those still in use, became available, and it is noteworthy that the negatives obtained by my father are of quality equal to the best I have been able to produce in respect of detail in both light and shady areas; this of course was before the use of photo-electric light meters. The estimation of exposure time was then a matter of experience, and the quality of the negatives depended on careful control of the development process. We still make use of these negatives, and the giant enlargements we obtain for documentation or decorative purposes are excellent.

My father's forte was the organisation of photographic expeditions on Mont

*56 Seracs 1865*


*57 Glacier travel 1905. Photo: Georges Tairraz père*

Blanc, but also the lower parts of the massif and the valley of Chamonix were for him an inexhaustible source of material of photographic interest. I have always marvelled at his feeling for the picturesque and his choice of subject matter. I was fortunate in being schooled by him, when as a child I often accompanied him on the lower slopes of the mountains in the neighbourhood of the glaciers and the huts. Many times we climbed together on foot (before the days of the first téléphériques in 1924) to the splendid belvederes which face the massif—le Brévent, la Flégère and le Buet. No doubt I was often more of a nuisance than a help to him; with patience, he taught me photography, how to analyse the countryside before me and isolate all that was of interest, so revealing the lines and masses which balanced the work.

Following the death in the 1914–18 War of my two elder brothers, one of whom had been destined to succeed my father, it was decided that I should terminate my studies and enter the business as my father's assistant. Thus, it seemed I was definitely to become a photographer. I would be third in the line at the Tairraz Studio.

The period up to the year 1900 had been that of the great exploration of the Mont Blanc massif and in particular of the Chamonix Aiguilles. The Englishmen, Whymper and Mummery, and the great guides of that period—Michel Croz, Franz Lochmatter, Alexander Burgener, Joseph Ravenal ('le Rouge'), Joseph Simond, Désaillaud, Adolphe Rey and Payot—attempted and succeeded in climbing reputedly 'unclimbable' rock faces with the limited means at their disposal—pitons were then unknown. Thus the achievement of the Marquis de Bouillé, who planted a fleur-de-lys flag on the summit of the Aiguille du Midi, was soon overshadowed. The Petit Dru was first climbed in 1878 by the guide Jean Charlet Straton, and Georges Tairraz, my father, made the second ascent with the guide François Simond. My father was therefore the first person to take pictures at the summit of the Petit Dru.

For my own part, I arrived on the scene at the moment when the possibilities of new, hitherto unknown photographs of our mountains were just becoming available. My first picture of Mont Blanc was taken in 1916. The success of this photograph and my father's complimentary remarks could only encourage me in the desire to expand the firm's collection of mountain views, particularly when the number of photographers in the region was growing with the increase in tourists and climbers around Chamonix, fast becoming an important centre for alpinism. (In 1973 during the months of July, August and September the population rose from its normal 9000 to nearly 60,000 inhabitants.) My principal desire then was to explore the whole massif, to climb every peak and to put on photographic record all the wonders which were to be found there.

Mountains give to those who frequent them emotions and impressions of which men on the plains know nothing; beauty, grandeur of line, harmony of great masses, splashes of light and shade; joy, but also fear. To communicate these impressions visually has been my ambition, and that is why it has been my privilege to climb every summit round Mont Blanc with my camera.

*58 The Col Superieur du Plan 1932. Photo: Georges Tairraz fils*

I have not been able to avoid the fascination of cine-photography. In 1924 the first motor driven cine cameras appeared, which greatly facilitated their use under mountain conditions. With several friends I made then my first documentary film, called 'L'Ascension des Aiguilles Ravenal et Mummery'. This film, unhappily destroyed later during a fire, was understandably not perfect, but it was nevertheless impressive. By then I had gained the confidence of the producers of mountain films, so that in 1935 I was engaged as the operator for the film, 'Trois Vies et une Corde', directed by the Belgian Stork, with the guide Roger Frison Roche in the leading role. Roche has since become a great writer on mountains and mountaineering. In the decade following World War II I participated in the making of a wide range of films—'Premier de Cordée' (made at Chamonix from the book by Frison Roche); a documentary film sponsored by the CAF with Pierre Allain; 'Rescue' (a British film directed by Ken Anekin); the 'White Tower' based on J. R. Ullman's book and Walt Disney's 'Third Man on the Mountain'. It was during the production of 'Trois Vies et une Corde' that I got to know Frison Roche, and a great friendship was born out of our knowledge of mountains and their attraction for us. By now it was 1950; colour cinematography was well established and it was possible to present at conferences 16 mm films of explorations and other unusual subjects. Frison Roche, whose novels are inspired by his expeditions in mountains or deserts was drawn by this new, up-to-date technique for gaining public interest. So, in 1950, we joined forces to produce 'Le Grande Désert'—1000 km on foot or camel-back from the Hoggar to Libya, accompanied only by 2 local natives and a black boy. It was a wonderful experience, with 35 bivouacs in total silence and isolation.

Then in 1952 came 'Sur les Traces de Premier de Cordée', a film about mountains and the life of the guides in the high valleys, followed in 1956 by 'Symphonie Hivernale', about the beauty of mountains in winter, the life of the mountain people in the snowbound villages, the coming of skiing which freed them from their isolation and became a source of happiness and well-being.

Another friend of mine is Gaston Rebuffat, who has exceptional qualities as a climber both on rocks and on ice. He has written widely about mountains and is also interested in photography and in the cinema. With him, I took part in 1956 and 1960 in the most difficult climbs of my alpine career—the N face of the Grandes Jorasses, Mont Blanc by the Peuterey arête, the Bonatti pillar of the Dru, the N faces of the Matterhorn and the Eiger, the Piz Badile and the Cima Grande di Lavaredo. It was these N faces, much sought after by contemporary climbers, where we made 'Étoiles et Tempêtes' and 'Entre Terre et Ciel'.

There is inevitably an element of risk in the life of a climber. During one of the ascents of Mont Blanc the roped party led by my father was overtaken by a storm near the Vallot hut. After several hours of wandering about, and at the limit of their strength, they were finally saved by one of the party accidentally stumbling against the walls of the invisible hut.

Coming back from Mont Blanc, after my first ascent in 1916, I found myself

separated from my companions, and was surprised by an avalanche at the exit from the glacier, when a stone whistled by grazing my cheek. I had just taken my first mountain photograph—I was only 16 years old. It might well have been my last.

With the guide Arthur Ravenal, friend and rope companion of my youth, I was on my way back from the ascent of the Aiguilles Ravenal and Mummery. In traversing under the Arête des Cristaux, we were alerted by a dull crack, heavy and prolonged. About 200 m away and directly over our heads, an enormous block of granite the size of a small house was coming away from the rock face, and heading towards us. We had time only to duck down and squeeze into a cleft in the rocks. The avalanche, with a terrifying noise, arrived on top of us. In the half light of the evening we could see the sparks which were thrown out from the pieces of rock as they struck the face of the cliff; at last, a sight I shall never forget, the block passed a few metres away from us, bounced, and in an immense shower of ice buried itself in the Talèfre glacier. A great silence followed and we realised how providential our escape had been.

On another occasion Frison Roche and I were filming in the Combe Maudite, on the right of the Grands Mulets, on the most broken glacier in the massif. We had to film a climber who was finding his way through a labyrinth of crevasses; we were passing along beside a gully which was some 50 m deep, perhaps a few metres above it, when I spotted the ideal place to set up my camera. For convenience I detached my rope, an act of imprudence which I shall never repeat. While I was erecting the tripod, I slipped and fell on my back; I could not stop myself sliding. With a feeling of horror, which you can imagine, I dropped into the gully which we had been walking alongside. But a saddle of snow about half-way down arrested my fall; I called for help and someone threw down a rope. When I had been pulled back and had rejoined my companions I saw that their faces were as white as mine must have been.

Once with Gaston Rebuffat I escaped from a perilous situation thanks to what seemed like the intervention of Providence. Gaston was watching and holding me on the rope while, clinging to the completely vertical face of the Brévent, I looked around for a suitable place to set up my cine-camera, from which I could get an impressive view of a guide tackling a vertical route. There was an empty space of some 200 m beneath me. While I hung on to the cliff, on holds which were somewhat shaly and insecure, I had a sudden feeling that the rope supporting me had stretched—then it suddenly snapped. I was on my own with nothing to hold me. Terrified by the open spaces I started to shake. I thought it was the end of me. I firmly believe I was helped by Providence, for I managed to summon the power to control my emotions and my shaking. Gaston Rebuffat had sufficient time to send down an end of the rope and with its help I was able to extricate myself from this unenviable position.

In 1957 my son Pierre finished his military service with the Air Force. He was of a mischievous and teasing temperament, but without malice, and his atti-

tudes to laboratory work made me realise the patience my father had shown towards me. Forceful and determined, Pierre was well equipped to deal with any difficulties the future might hold for him. Without delay he finished his studies as a photographer at the French School of Photography in Paris and at the Institute des Hautes Études Cinématographique (IDHEC). At the end of the course he was seriously tempted by the opportunities which television offered, but happily he was passionately keen on mountains. The certainty of a good situation at home in Chamonix, coupled with the prospect of an open-air life in the high mountains overcame his hesitation. For me this was a great joy.

*59 Chamonix granite 1974. Photo: Pierre Tairraz*

*60 Joseph Tairraz 1827–1902. This and next three photos: Tairraz, Chamonix*

*61 Georges Tairraz père 1868–1924*

*62 Georges Tairraz fils 1900–*

*63 Pierre Tairraz 1933–*

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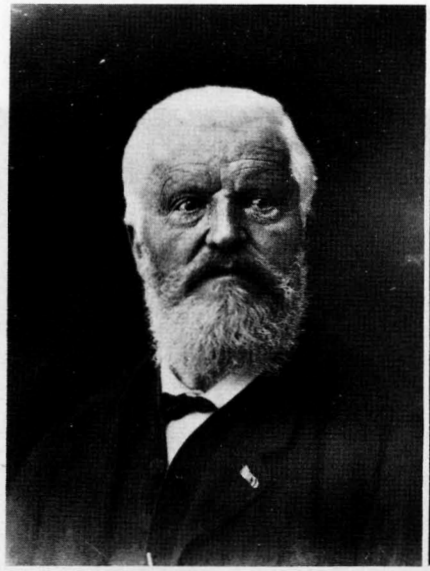

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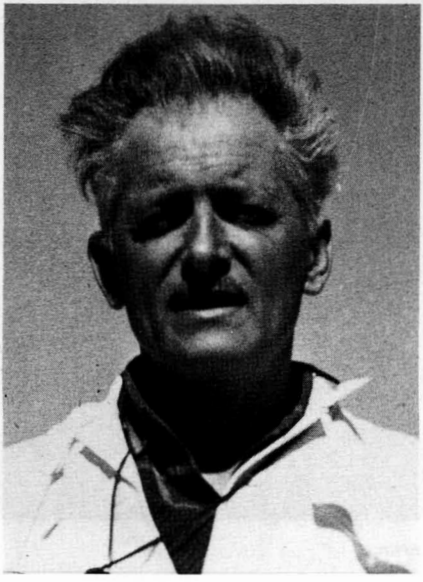

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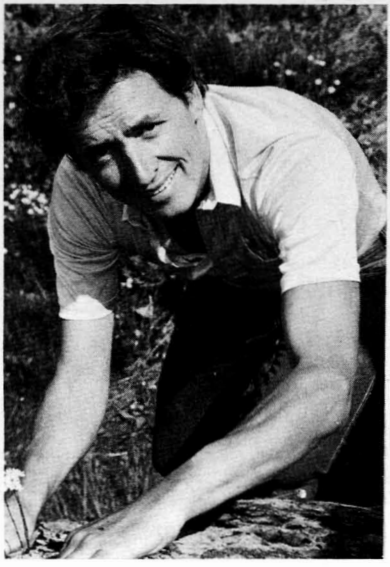

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The 'Tairraz Alpine Photographic Studio' could celebrate its centenary after all. Pierre, the fourth generation, would assure its continuation. Also some extraordinary new possibilities were opening up for him. Colour was, in fact, just being perfected and so he could remake in colour the entire collection his predecessors had made in black-and-white. Mountain aviation was now increasingly possible and, with the advent of the helicopter, my son was able to take alpine pictures from new and unusual angles. He therefore obtained a pilot's licence. Soon the Mont Blanc massif had no more secrets for him. He added to the collection of photographs taken on new climbing routes and further enlarged his interests by covering the mountains of the Oisans and the Vanoise, the Barre des Écrins and many others.

Having studied at the IDHEC it was natural that Pierre would give great importance to the moving picture side of his work. The television authorities entrusted him with several delicate undertakings, among them 'Le Gouffre de la Pierre Saint Martin', a live programme from the Aiguille du Midi, and latterly 'Les Aiguilles du Diable', marking the 25th anniversary of direct outside broadcasts.

In 1961 I left him with complete responsibility for finishing with Gaston Rebuffat the film 'Entre Terre et Ciel'. The same year he took the sequences for 'Le Pilier de la Solitude', a documentary film made in collaboration with the Swiss alpinist Michel Vaucher, which re-enacted the extraordinary exploits of Walter Bonatti in the ascent of the SW face of the Dru. Then in 1962 Pierre made a series of travel films about the rebirth of the Negev desert in Israel, called 'Torrents dans le Désert'. This was followed in 1964 by 'Bonjour la Roumanie' and 'Le Grand-Raid' or 'La Croisière Mousquetaire', using veteran cars and illustrating the wonders to be encountered in a trip from Lappland to Paris via Moscow, Turkey, Greece and Italy. In 1966, with Roger Frison Roche, Pierre made a documentary called 'Peuples Chasseurs de l'Arctique' shot in the Canadian winter and featuring reindeer hunting and life in igloos. During the 4 months the mean temperature was $-40^{\circ}$; sometimes great storms added to the difficulties.

During 1974 Pierre made a film about the National Park of the Vanoise. Later in the year, having been chosen as one of the cine-photographers and still camera operators in the team of guides from Chamonix who set out to climb Everest, it looked as though he would be able to realise his greatest ambition, well understood in a family of mountain photographers, to climb and photograph the highest peak in the world. Unfortunately the expedition had to be abandoned after the death of the leader, Gérard Dévouassoud, and 5 Sherpas, who were buried under enormous snow avalanches.