

# In Commemoration of the Bi-Centenary of the First Successful Ascent of Mont Blanc, 8th August 1786

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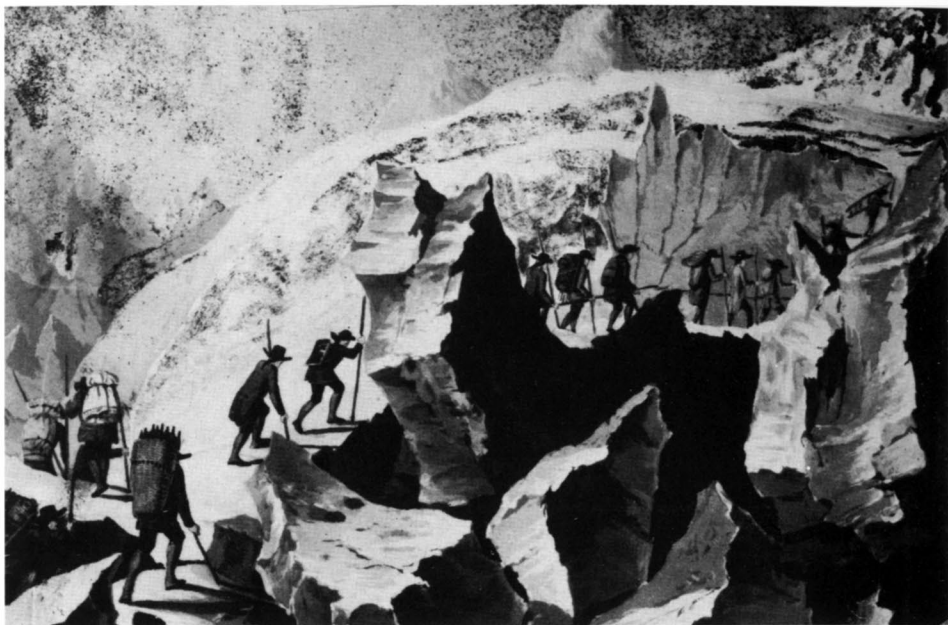
*Plates 59–66*

The first ascent of Mont Blanc was achieved on 8 August 1786 — two hundred years ago. In this attainment, the sport and science of mountaineering had its beginning. Until that time, the imposing chain of mountains, *les Rochers Blanches*, crowned by the highest peak in Europe, held little interest to anyone except local chamois-hunters and collectors of rock-crystals. For the hundreds of *Grand Tourists* who had been travelling across Europe since the late 17th century, the Alps constituted an annoying barrier on their way to Italy, whither they were bound in search of culture — not scenery, scientific study or exercise.

The mountain known locally as *le Mont Maudit* did not acquire its now famous name until Pierre Martel, an engineer of Geneva, who was making a survey of the district, wrote in a letter, dated 1742 and published in 1744, that the 'Point of *Mont Blanc*' was the highest 'perhaps of all the *Alps*'. He said it could be seen in France from as far away as Dijon (216km) and Langres (264km) to the NW. He also stated that the top was entirely covered by ice, blunt, but quite steep on the NE side at an angle of 25°–30°. In all of these points, he has been proved substantially correct. The name, 'le Mont Maudit', is now applied to a peak NE of the summit.

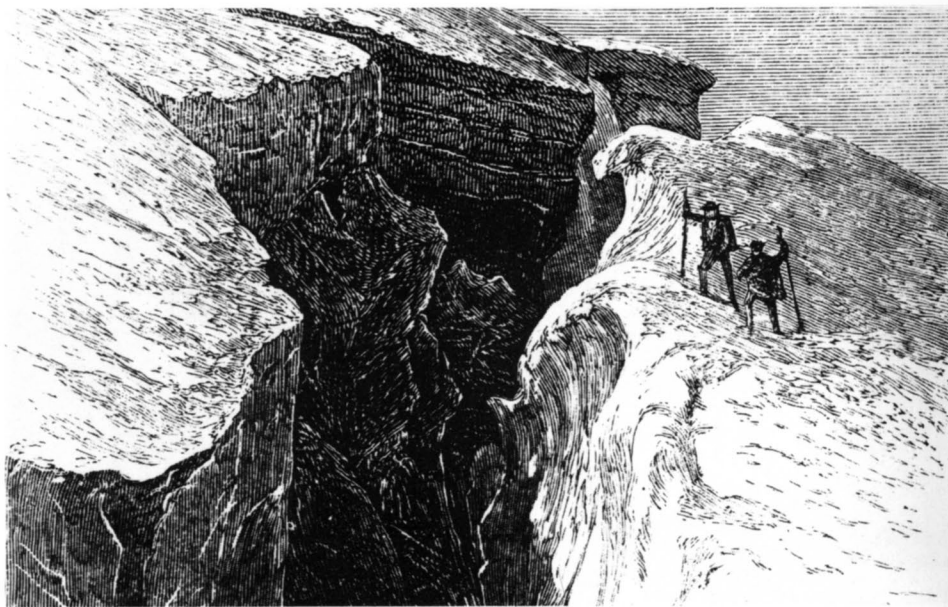
The first ascent came about through the enthusiasm and scientific curiosity of Horace-Bénédict de Saussure, also of Geneva. He had been fascinated by the mountains since his youth and was frequently 'upon the ice'. He may be said to be the first Alpinist for his studies of rock, ice and altitude during a period of thirty years. He longed to perform scientific experiments on the summit of Mont Blanc and as early as 1760, when he was only 20 years old, offered a prize to anyone finding a route to the top. However, fear, superstition and ignorance seem to have deterred the local people from making the attempt. They thought that the mountains were inhabited by evil spirits. Also, as the upper regions were bare of living things, it followed that human life could not be supported at such heights. Moreover, those who had clambered up to any appreciable altitude had noticed an uncanny darkness of the sky and believed that the Almighty was frowning with displeasure at their audacity in venturing so far heavenwards.

In the early 1780s, several climbers had narrowly failed in their attempts, but on 8 August 1786 the summit was finally reached by two Chamoniards, Dr Michel-Gabriel Paccard and Jacques Balmat, the latter, thereafter, dubbed *Mont Blanc*. Saussure immediately tried himself, but bad weather robbed him



*From The Illustrated London News, 22 September 1855.*

- 59 The ascent of Mont Blanc by Saussure, 1787. The first guide carries the ladder and the porter (last but one), the bottles. Saussure (centre L) wears a tail-coat and wig with queue.



*From: The Illustrated London News, 9 August 1862.*

- 60 A guide showing Tyndall the fatal 'Hamel' crevasse.

of success. However, the next season, on 3 August 1787, he at last achieved his ambition — at the age of 47 — and was able to carry out some of his experiments on the summit. A week later, on 9 August, a third successful ascent was made by the astronomer, Mark Beaufoy, who correctly established the latitude of Mont Blanc as  $45^{\circ} 50' \text{ N}$ . He was the first Englishman — but by no means the last — to make the ascent. In fact, it was the English, who put Chamonix, then known as Le Prieuré, 'on the map' and caused the establishment of the Hotel de Londres (as long ago as 1743), followed by the Hotel de l'Angleterre, to make them feel at home. Many other hotels were built later when, during the 19th century, hundreds of tourists flocked there and the ascent of Mont Blanc had become almost a national English pastime.

Both Dr Paccard (aged 70) and Col Beaufoy (aged 63) died in 1827, but that year saw two more successful ascents by Englishmen — Charles Fellows with his friend William Hawes in July and, two weeks later, in August, John Auldjo. These were the 13th and 14th and brought up the number of Britons (Auldjo's certificate cites him as Scottish) to 9 out of 16 tourists to reach the summit. The other successful climbers had been of various nationalities — Russian, Swiss, German, Polish and American. Apart from these, in 1808 (some say 1809), there had been a party of 17 Chamoniards, led by Balmat-*MontBlanc*, which also included the first woman to make the ascent. She was Marie Paradis, aged 22 (some say 25 or even 30), who became known as *Marie de Mont Blanc*. It was not until 1834 that the first Frenchman achieved the goal. He was Henri, Comte de Tilly, a royalist living in exile in Venice, who proudly placed the white flag of the Bourbons on the summit. He, however, suffered very badly from so late an ascent — 9 October, the latest ever tried — his feet becoming so frost-bitten, that he feared he would lose his legs through ensuing gangrene. In August 1840, the Marchese di Sant' Angelo was the first successful Italian. He was the fourth titled person to have got to the top; others had failed in their attempts. M de Saussure and Mlle d'Angeville were also of noble families. The enterprise was very expensive and clearly only the well-to-do could hope to meet the costs of the guides, porters and provisions necessary. In 1827, the ascent had cost Fellows (the son of a wealthy banker) and Hawes £22:15:3 each; for Atkins with two others in 1837, it had cost £23 each; Erasmus Galton on his own in 1850 spent £34:6:0. But in 1855 a party of 2 (with guides and porters) had spent only £4 and Hudson's party of 6 (without guides) reckoned on spending a mere £2 each.

In 1838, Mlle Henriette d'Angeville was the first woman tourist to succeed and, at the age of 44, was also much the oldest climber (except for Saussure). However, in 1875, the Marquis de Turenne arrived at the summit with a large retinue at the advanced age of 72. Another French achievement of note was the unparalleled feat of climbing to the summit twice within the space of 5 days. This was realised in 1843 by a physician of Besançon, Dr E Ordinaire — surely Dr E[xtra] Ordinaire! His ascents were the 25th and 26th successful (out of 37) in 57 years. There was another ascent that year, then, in the next 20 years, there were as many as 44 more successes.

While listing famous successes, it is worth recalling the most famous of failures, the persistent Marc-Théodore Bourrit, a journalist and artist of

Geneva. He had made attempts on the summit nearly every year from 1766 until 1812, but, although getting to within a few hundred metres of his goal on five occasions, he never once achieved his life-long ambition. He died in 1819, aged 80. Apart from the dates of Paccard's and Saussure's climbs, the other most famous date in Mont Blanc history is certainly 1820, the year of the first fatal accident. Dr Joseph von Hamel, whose intention was to make some scientific experiments on the summit for the Russian court, set out with 15 other persons, including two young Oxford students. They got to within some 150m of the summit, when suddenly the whole party was engulfed in an avalanche and swept some distance down the mountain. When they extricated themselves from the snow, it was found that three guides had fallen irretrievably into a crevasse. On all subsequent ascents, the spot where these unfortunates fell was pointed out in hushed tones. Parts of their bodies, clothing and equipment finally emerged some 40 years later at the bottom of the Glacier des Bossons, about 7km away, as had been predicted by the scientist Professor James David Forbes. He had spent much time on the ice in the 1840s, mapping the glaciers and calculating their movement. Glaciers descend at the rate of about 30 to 40cm a day, or 1 to 1.5km in ten years. Like a flowing river, the centre moves faster than the sides. Forbes recorded finding pieces of a ladder and wood from a cabin set up in 1788 by Saussure, who had also propounded a theory of glacier movement. Forbes's own ice-axe was found years later farther down the glacier on which it had been lost.

In spite of the increasing numbers of persons making the ascent each year, accidents on Mont Blanc were fortunately few — though frost-bite and snow-blindness were all too common, due to insufficient clothing and neglect of precautions against the glare and the wind. In the first hundred years of the ascent, there were only 24 deaths — seven tourists and 17 guides and porters. Of these, five persons were killed in 1866 and 13 (eleven in one disaster) in the fatal year of 1870. In August 1866, Sir George Young and his two brothers made the ascent, unaccompanied by guides. In an unlucky fall soon after commencing their descent, the youngest brother broke his neck. Very late the same season, on the inauspicious date of 13 October, Captain Henry Arkwright and party of three were swept away by an avalanche very near the 'fatal spot'. Their bodies were recovered 31 years later, in August 1897. At about the same place, on 2 August, 1870, a lady, left in the charge of a porter while her husband made the assault on the summit, walked into a crevasse — the 'Hamel' crevasse again? In the September of that year, three Americans with eight guides, after reaching the summit, were marooned in a storm that lasted 12 days and perished, starved and frozen to death.

The route pioneered by Paccard and Balmat was the only way to the summit until 1827. It passed to the west of the last peaks, les Rochers Rouges, near which Hamel's party suffered their dreadful accident. Fellows, Hawes and party found a way, which diverged to the east — a passage called the *Corridor*, followed by a long, acute slope, about 100m high, called the *Mur de la Côte*. This, though more fatiguing since it necessitated the cutting of hundreds of steps, nevertheless, avoided the *Ancien Passage* of fatal memory, where an ever-open crevasse seemed to be waiting for its next victims. Although both Fellows



*From: The Forms of Water, etc., by John Tyndall, 1872.*

61 Hudson and party, 1855; from a photograph by G. E. Joad.



*From: Travels Through the Alps, by James D. Forbes, 1843.*

62 Ascent of Mont Blanc from 'les Grands Mulets'; from a photograph by Bisson, 1861.

and Hawes published accounts, it was in fact John Auldjo, who followed their route a fortnight later, to whom the advertising of this new and safer way was due. Auldjo was to settle in Geneva, becoming British Consul from 1870 until his death in 1886. Although Sir Charles Fellows, as he was to become in recognition of his part in bringing the Xanthian Marbles to the British Museum in the 1840s, is better known for his archaeological journeys in Turkey, he never forgot his first great adventure and 30 years later would still warn of the dangers of the undertaking.

The new route continued to be used for the next 30 years, until the Rev Charles Hudson and some friends pioneered yet another route to the top in July 1859. This way, via les Bosses du Dromadaire, passed farther to the west of the *Ancien Passage*. It had in fact probably been discovered many years earlier by the redoubtable Chamonix guide, Marie Couttet, nick-named *le Chamois* or *le Moutelet* (the Weasel). In 1844 he had waylaid a French scientific party and offered to take them to the summit by a new route, but their guides refused and they continued by the old way. Couttet, the son of Saussure's guide, had spent his whole life on the ice and was acknowledged as a man of 'extraordinary intelligence', the best Mont Blanc guide. He had already been five times to the summit when he joined Dr Hamel's ill-fated party and he identified the remains years later; the ascents of Fellows and Hawes followed by Auldjo's were his 7th and 8th successes. He took Mlle d'Angeville to the summit, kissed her and even lifted her up, so that she could be the highest person in Europe ever! Although he suffered several severe injuries during the course of a life-time on the mountain, Couttet nevertheless continued to be obsessed by Mont Blanc into his old age, tagging along uninvited and becoming an embarrassment to organized parties. His last official climb was in 1850. He died, aged 80, in 1872. Jacques Balmat-Mont Blanc had also been unable to keep away from the mountain and was lost — perhaps murdered for the gold he was seeking — on its slopes in 1835, aged at least 70.

Hudson, one of the first real mountaineers to be interested in Mont Blanc, had already made several attempts on the summit by differing routes and twice achieved the objective in 1853 and again in 1855, on his second attempt. This was the first time a party had reached the summit without either ladder or guides. Hudson and his party had planned their route from the Italian side, in order to avoid the obligation of using Chamonix guides, who were, for them, both an unnecessary expense and a nuisance. They had the help of Forbes' maps of the glaciers and their own considerable experience instead. On the way up they bivouacked on the Col du Géant within the walls of Saussure's cabin, still standing after nearly 70 years. This was the 98th success — 62 of the climbers had been British, only 10 French. With Hudson, who was killed in the famous Matterhorn accident of July 1865, were Edward S Kennedy, who became the second President of the Alpine Club, and George Joad, a young photographer. He climbed to nearly 4000m before descending, leaving Hudson, Kennedy and three other friends to go on to the top. Joad's photo of the group at their camp (c. 3000m) was used as frontispiece to the book describing the 1855 ascents. The first photographs from the summit were taken some years later by Auguste Bisson, a French photographer. It needed 25 porters to carry

the heavy, clumsy apparatus and chemicals. On 25 July 1861 Bisson took three large plates — and fixed them — on the summit. They were processed in his Paris studio and exhibited at the 1862 International Exhibition in London.

The ladder played an essential part in the early ascents of Mont Blanc. Under a useful rock, the *Pierre de l'Echelle*, at a height of about 2300m, was a ladder — Mont Blanc climbers, for the use of. It was employed, as today, not so much to scale rock faces, as to cross crevasses, by simply laying it over the gap. On returning, the ladder was carefully left again at the *Pierre* for the next party. As the numbers of ascents per year increased so several ladders were left at this spot. By the 1850s there was quite a collection of them. The climbers were not Alpinists in the modern sense, no *pitons* or tackle were used and the walk or ramble to the top was made by plodding slowly upwards with crampons of double-headed nails tied on to their shoes, or screwed into the soles. Both climbers and guides carried *batons* — poles about 2m long with an iron spike at the end — to test the snow and support themselves. When held between two guides, they became hand-rails. The guides were also very skilful in using them to control a descent by *glissade*, the tourist sitting behind a guide to slide rapidly down the slope, feet first. Ropes, 3–5m long, were used in dangerous areas, the tourist attached between two guides, the other guides roped together in threes.

Other necessities for the excursion consisted of blankets and straw for bedding; wood and a spirit stove for heating food and snow; an axe to cut steps in the ice; a long, cumbersome mountain-barometer (which usually got broken); altitude thermometers (likewise) and other scientific instruments; a telescope; a pistol to fire off on the summit; writing and drawing materials; a National flag. Saussure added a parasol and a tent to work in on the summit. He also took his personal servant with him, as indeed did Beaufoy. As well as all these items, vast quantities of food and drink were carried, at least as far as *les Grand Mulets* quite a lot even the whole way, in spite of the knowledge that, at high altitudes, most people lost their appetites, felt nausea even at the sight of food, and that wine and strong drink did not quench the raging thirst they all suffered. Nevertheless, Auldjo, for example, with eight guides, took 23 bottles of wine and strong drink, but only 2½ bottles of vinegar and *sirop* to refresh their parched throats. He also took 38 pieces of meat and fowls, not forgetting several 3lb loaves and a 'large quantity of cheese'. In the end, raisins sucked with snow were found the best against thirst and fatigue. The strong drink and wine were favoured by the guides at the overnight stop; champagne was, of course, essential for the toasts on the summit. The guides insisted on the provisions for fear of being caught by bad weather without adequate supplies, as actually happened in the 1870 disaster.

The ordinary 'travelling dress' of the period was worn, but extra socks, shirts, trousers and waistcoats were put on for the night and the day of the assault on the summit. Broad-brimmed hats were worn against the powerful rays of the sun, beneath which they kept on their night-caps, or used scarves, Balaclava style, to protect their ears and chin. Green veils or masks were worn to guard the face and green or blue spectacles for the eyes. Coarse cloth gaiters, like those worn by the villagers, were wrapped round the legs. Mlle d'Angeville affected a coyness at wearing full-waisted trousers under her skirt (both made of



63 Mlle d'Angeville using a ladder to cross a crevasse, 1838. Tinted Lithograph.



From: Narrative of an Ascent to the Summit of Mont Blanc on the eighth and ninth of August, 1827.

64 J. Auldjo's party, 1827.

Scotch cloth in a loud check), but she retained her femininity with a boa about her shoulders. She also took a mirror to make sure her bonnet was on straight. She tried unsuccessfully to preserve her face by the use of cucumber pomade, suffering, as many did, on her return to Chamonix with the skin burnt and blistered and her eyes very inflamed and painful. One lady is reported to have taken a live pigeon with her to keep her hands warm.

Pigeons were several times carried up Mont Blanc to test their powers of flight at high altitudes. Choughs and yellow-billed crows were known to fly near, if not over, the summit, but for pigeons it was a different matter. Dr Hamel took up a carrier-pigeon, but the unfortunate bird perished with the guide who was carrying the cage on his back. Its wing was eventually found in 1861, together with a leg of mutton — quite fresh — when the glacier gave up remains from the accident. Another poor bird, taken by Mlle d'Angeville, flew off the summit, but could not find its way home (N) and finished up as dinner for the *curé* of the village of Contamines (W). One pigeon in 1861 took 2 days to fly home to Chamonix, only 10 or 11km as the crow — or rather the pigeon — flies. Others, more sensibly, refused to fly at all.

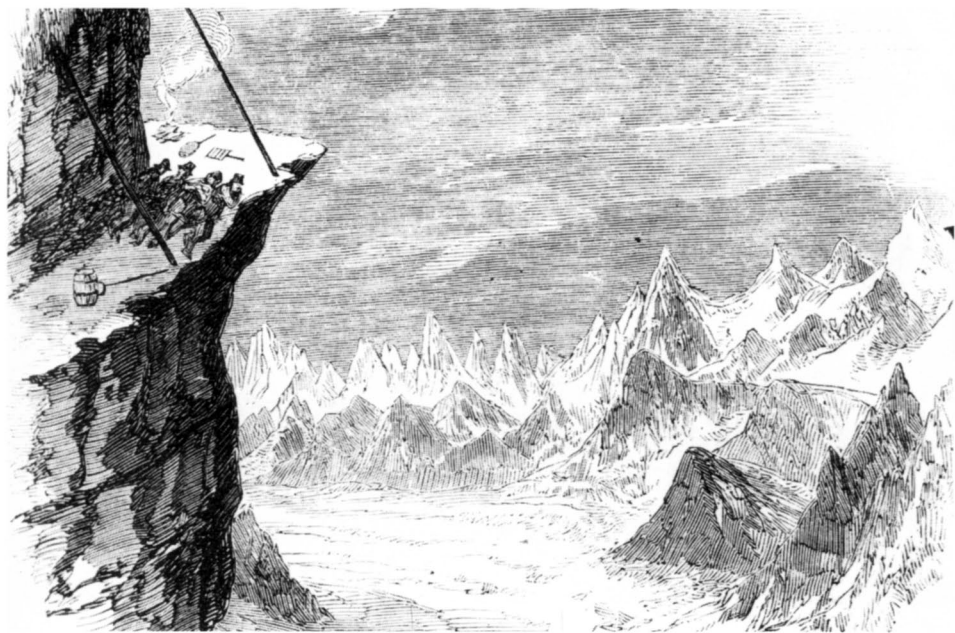
More courageous have been the various dogs, both male and female, which have climbed to the summit. The first belonged to Henry Atkins' guide in 1837. At that time, Atkins, not yet 19 years old, was the youngest tourist to make a successful ascent. He later joined the Army, but died prematurely in 1842. The 'little dog', a rough-coated Griffon, wisely sat on his master's feet at every pause and on his lap on the summit. A Griffon bitch, *Diane*, who accompanied Mlle d'Angeville's party in 1838, slept for several days following her exploit, and in 1861 Professor Wilhelm Pitschner's dog lost its bark. Another dog is alleged to have been twice to the summit and one guide's bitch, *Finette*, formed the habit of ascending as far as les Grands Mulets on every occasion, going there 20–30 times over. But the canine mountaineer *par excellence* was the intrepid bitch, *Tschingel* (1865–79), which ascended Mont Blanc on 24 July 1875 and also ascended 10 other notable peaks, including the Wetterhorn, the Eiger, the Jungfrau and Monte Rosa (c. 4600m). The hospice of St Bernard with its famous dogs is at only a little over 2400m.

Perhaps the most intriguing little animal on Mont Blanc is the Alpine mouse or vole, the 'Campagnol des neiges', *Microtus* [*Arvicola*] *nivalis*. These animals live well above the tree-line, at altitudes between 2000m and 4000m. They do not change their coats and do not hibernate. They have even been seen in mid-winter. They are found at several locations in the Alps. They had been known to guides on Mont Blanc from the early 1800s, but scarcely believed in. A 'weasel' was reported in 1819 and 'mice' in 1834. In 1825 Clarke and Sherwill spent some time looking for one at les Grands Mulets as their guide said that on previous occasions, much to his surprise, he had found articles left there eaten, as if by mice! He described the little animals correctly as 'something like a weasel . . . larger than a rat, of a reddish colour . . . with a long tail . . . and whiskers'. Since no trace of them could be found, Clarke concluded they were chance visitors and had become extinct. Not so; they were finally described by the French scientist, Charles Martins, who had seen them on the Faulhorn in 1841.

Although the motives for making the ascent to the summit of Mont Blanc have varied from scientific and medical research to 'a love of hardy enterprise' (Jackson), 'the desire to witness some of the most stupendous of nature's works' (Fellows), pure curiosity and foolish vanity, the manner of achieving the objective followed a standard pattern. For each tourist, there were 5 or 6 guides taken from the same half-dozen Chamonix families, and as many porters as deemed necessary. They would start from the village at dawn, the tourists generally having the luxury of a mule ride as far as the tree-line, where a stop was made for breakfast. Then the hard work began, as fairly soon they had to cross the Glacier des Bossons, which was always hard going. After that it was a steady pull up to the overnight resting place, les Grand Mulets, the half-way point. Here the porters were sent back. The party would arrive in the afternoon, change their clothes, putting out the wet shoes and socks to dry in the sun, which at that height is very strong. Hot food was prepared by the guides; the tourists admired the view, took rock samples and did a little botanizing. They watched the sunset, truly splendid at this situation, but as soon as darkness fell, they all lay down to rest. They used a ledge, protected from the avalanches, 30m up the rocks. It was only some 3.6m long by 1.2m wide, so they were exceedingly cramped, some guides needing to seek a place elsewhere. *Batons* were put sloping against the rock-face and sheeting was laid over them to give some protection from the intense cold and wind. Although the writer of each account never seemed to close an eye, his companions always slept well enough, in spite of the precarious position and the thunder of falling rocks and ice.

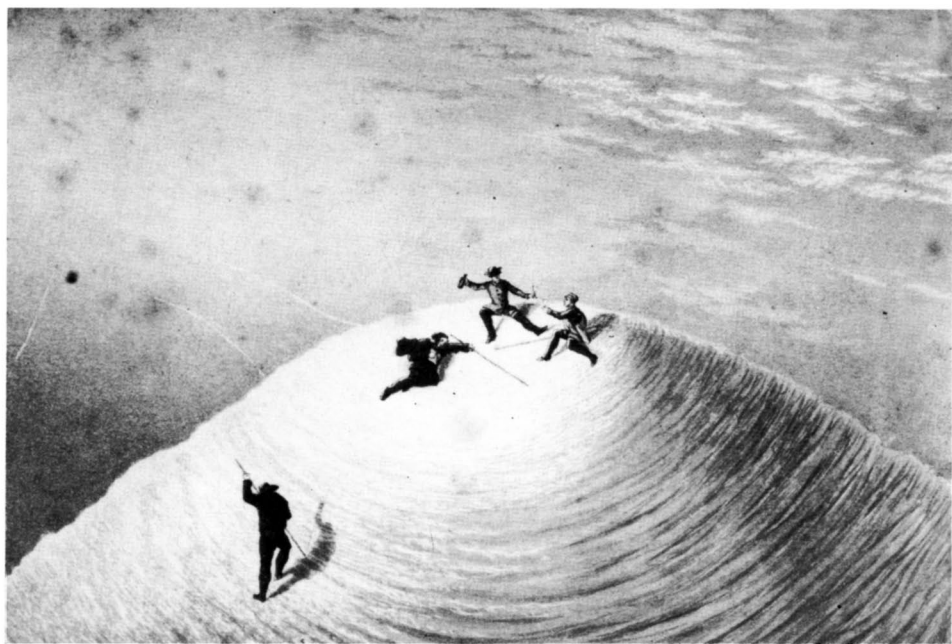
The assault on the summit began before dawn, with the guides carrying torches. At about 4000m many began to feel the effects of altitude — nausea, headache, difficulty in breathing, faintness — and it became necessary to rest with increasing frequency, every 15, 10, 5 paces. Some lay down for a minute, but the danger of frost-bite meant the stamping of feet even at these times. The *Grand Plateau*, which is in fact a series of plains, was a very laborious undertaking to cross and, at about 4500m, many experienced a sort of mental apathy, when, with the summit clearly in sight and seeming only yards away, they were overtaken by a strong desire to give up, feeling that the conquest of Mont Blanc was, after all, of no consequence whatever. Perhaps this was the fundamental reason for all Bourrit's failures. Here the experienced guides would give encouragement and often physical support up the last slopes and on to the summit, which was accomplished in a kind of dream-state. Suddenly they found the ground 'no longer rising', in fact nothing at all around them. They had made it! A brief pause was all that was required to regain control and then contemplate the panorama.

The summit itself was usually described as being like an ass's back, with more or less of a ridge along it, steeper on the NE side, off which the wind blows fiercely. After a quick look around, the party would generally retire a few feet into the lee of the crest to feel the warmth of the sun and carry out some well-tried experiments, such as noting the feebleness of the report of a pistol; seeing the champagne cork fly off with great speed but little sound; finding the boiling-point of water; calculating the height of the mountain. Mont Blanc is



65 *Lying on the ledge at 'les Grands Mulets'.*

*From: The Illustrated London News, 8 February 1851.*



66 *The summit! Two tourists celebrating; one guide resting, the other just arriving.*

*From: Ascent of Mont Blanc with description, by J. Macgregor, 1855.*

nearly 3 miles high but, as the top is an ice-cap, the height varies from season to season and has been reported at anything between 4480m to nearly 4800m. A rock just below the summit, La Tourette, at about 4740m must be the highest actual peak in Europe — Monte Rosa is given as 4634m. On the summit, the sky was usually observed to be dark indigo in colour and the sun smaller than normal. As he approached up the final slopes, the Comte de Tilly saw the sun surrounded by 7 rainbows; Martins, who remained 'till evening, was awed by the vast triangle of shadow cast over Piedmont by the sun setting behind the cone of the summit of Mont Blanc'. Some of the guides claimed to have seen the stars in daylight and some — obstinately — to have seen the Mediterranean Sea near Genoa, a geographical impossibility. The Comte de Tilly and young Atkins both believed they could just make out Venice, 430km to the east.

Except for the scientists, who remained several hours on the summit — Saussure, 4½ hours; Martins, Bravais and Lepileur, who repeated his experiments in 1844, 5 hours — and those apparently competing in a race to beat the fastest time, who, therefore, only stayed a few minutes — Jackson, 36½ hours in 1823; Galton, 32½ hours in 1850; Morshead, who climbed alone without a guide, only 16 hours in 1864 — most tourists remained about 20–30 minutes, just long enough to check off the Alpine peaks; note the Lake of Geneva and Chamonix below them; perhaps make a few notes or write home, and then it was time to start back down the ice and snow to *terra firma* again. For them, to have achieved their ambition and experienced some spiritual satisfaction was sufficient in itself. Some believed they felt a certain lightness of body, as if floating just off the ground. More likely, it was a lightness in the head through altitude, fatigue and emotion. If lucky, they saw, but could not hear, the cannon fired off at Chamonix, whence their progress had been monitored by villagers, family and friends through telescopes — a spectator sport almost as thrilling as the climb itself. Two bizarre French ladies once organized a quadrille on the summit with their 16 guides, which must have been well worth watching! But that was in 1865, when 'Mont Blanc mania' was at its height.

The descent was quicker, but at times more fatiguing and hazardous, than the ascent, but the climbers enjoyed the exhilaration of the *glissade*. A pause was made at les Grands Mulets to collect their belongings and engrave their names on the rocks — Balmat had set a precedent in 1786! Some passed a second night there before struggling back across the Glacier des Bossons to the Cascade des Pèlerins, where Marie de Mont Blanc was wont to meet them with a picnic *sur l'herbe* of fresh bread, cream and goat's milk spread upon a white table-cloth. She died in 1838. The boulder, which caused the beautiful cascade, was swept away in 1853. Mules waited to take the tourists in triumph to the village and it became the custom to welcome them with cannon-fire, music, flag-bedecked houses and a banquet that night. The climbers themselves were not, however, always so pleased with this effusion, preferring to nurse their swollen, unsightly faces, frost-bitten feet and almost blind eyes. The villagers and summer visitors to the inns, though, enjoyed it all and the hotel-keepers did good business. The whole trip was calculated by Auldjo to be 54 miles; John Barrow, in 1861, made it only 35 to 40 miles, but the distance would depend on the route taken and the conditions of the ice and snow.

During the 1840s, increasing numbers of people made successful ascents, following the prescribed route and by 1850, fifty-two people (about half of them English) had got to the summit, with many more going as far as les Grands Mulets. A hut for their convenience was built late in 1852 following the ascent of Albert Smith, who, more than anyone should have been called *Mr Mont Blanc*. Smith was 35 years old when he realized his long-cherished wish to climb to the top. In August 1851, he had joined a party of three students with 16 guides, but he was out of condition and had to be pushed and pulled the last hundred metres or so, arriving in a state of hallucination. However, he soon recovered and the mountain-top rang to cheers and the popping of champagne corks. Smith revelled in their heroes' progress through the village on their return. They had also thoroughly enjoyed themselves at les Grand Mulets the previous afternoon. Here the hut was built, so that, in future, many more tourists, afraid of sleeping exposed on the ledge, could stay overnight to experience the wonderful sunsets and sunrises, or even continue on to the summit. It was, however, only about 4m long by 2m wide and soon became flea-ridden, as well as suffocating, since the guides, fearful of the cold, stopped up every cranny, so that the air was soon laden with wood and tobacco smoke. In September 1853 nearly 50 people endeavoured to pass the night in it, sitting in rows like negro slaves. They joked and smoked the night away and wrote their names on the walls before they left next day. In 1861 a guest-book was installed and, since ladies were going this far in ever greater numbers, in 1866-67 the hut was enlarged to 16m by 6m by the addition of three more rooms — one for the guides, one for the ladies and another for the gentlemen — the main room serving as a dining-room and for drying clothes near the fire. A real hotel now stands near this spot.

Smith's trip to Mont Blanc had followed the closure of his successful show in London, in which he had described his travels to the East against a background of dioramas. On his return, he put on an even more exciting entertainment at the Egyptian Hall, Piccadilly, relating his adventurous ascent, enhanced by dioramas, songs and humorous stories. For the first performance in March 1852 the stage was decorated with alpine plants, and a framed certificate — given to all successful climbers attesting the validity of their achievement and signed by the *Syndic* — had a prominent place. The spectacle was an immediate success and became all the rage. Smith was a natural showman and every season he brought new ideas into the performance. He made the stage into a Swiss chalet; added more songs; brought over guides from Chamonix and girls dressed in National (Swiss) costume; sold cow-bells and other Alpine novelties. Even Hamel and Auldjo took part, vying with several St Bernard dogs and some chamois as curiosities. In 1854 he took the show to Osborne House, the first of two royal command performances. Smith closed after the 1857/58 season, having given over 2000 performances.

In 1857, the Prince of Wales, aged 16, intrigued by Smith's Mont Blanc spectacular, arrived at Chamonix and was taken by Smith himself across the Glacier des Bossons to a height of about 3000m. 1857 also marked the foundation of the Alpine Club. By then, many other peaks had been climbed and mountaineering in the modern sense, as opposed to walking and scramb-

ling up the mountains, had come into being. After Smith's success Chamonix became a popular resort. A through-service from Boulogne to Geneva made the journey quick and easy; Cook's Tours started in 1863. Tourists, especially the English, flocked there every summer. Soon as many as 50, 60 or more successful ascents were made each season and by the end of the century, nearly fifteen hundred had been made. Although 200 years have now passed since the first conquest of the mountain, for tourists, scientists and mountaineers alike, Mont Blanc still retains its fascination, continuing to be a powerful inspiration and a challenge.

