Packe of the Pyrenees

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From a mountaineering point of view the Pyrenees have always suffered in comparison with the Alps, by whose standards they are bound to fall short; but for those of us who have a particular love of their relative isolation and solitude, this is no bad thing.

A hundred years ago, when the Alps had become firmly established as the Playground of Europe and the Golden Age had given way to a search for more adventurous routes on recognized peaks, the Pyrenees were being developed by a small band of activists from the Continent while, rather surprisingly, they were treated to little more than sober travels by members of the Alpine Club. Writing in Volume 12 of this *Journal* in August 1884, Charles Packe, one-time Secretary of the Club, recorded with obvious disdain the attitudes of his fellow members:

> 'The travellers who during the summer months throng Cauterets, Luchon, and even Gavarnie are of a very different class from those whom we meet at Chamonix and Zermatt. Even members of the Alpine Club in the Pyrenees seem to have turned Sybarites; they have left behind them love for climbing, and are content with the usual routine courses at the tail of a guide.'[1]

By the time he wrote this, Packe had been a noted mountain connoisseur for more than 30 years and an influence at one time or another on various leading figures from the world of mountaineering. Not an athletic climber, he was, however, a product of his day, catholic in his tastes, with an attitude towards the sport that was essentially in the traditional mould. 'The Tyndall of the Pyrenees' is how fellow enthusiast Henry Russell once described him, for his climbs and explorations were invariably intermingled with the accumulation of knowledge. In the valleys he botanized. On the heights he geologized. He mapped the inner recesses of uncharted massifs and on their summits laboriously noted the readings of his aneroid barometer. Today such diversions may seem positively archaic, but the inquiry into so many facets of the mountains among which he journeyed was responsible for opening the range for climbing of a more innovative nature, and his *Guide to the Pyrenees*, which had its first edition in 1862, was a direct result of this constant probing for enlightenment. Those who followed in his footsteps had good reason to be thankful for his breadth of vision.

As a mountain explorer he was fortunate in discovering the Pyrenees when he did. Already by the time of his first brief visit in 1853, most of the highest peaks had been climbed and rudimentary maps of the French slopes published. But there were still large tracts of practically unknown territory waiting to be unravelled, awaiting the detailed scrutiny of such a man, especially on the Spanish side of the frontier where his enthusiasms could be exercised virtually at will and without competition. Mountaineering was still very much in its

infancy, for few of those pioneers who were active in the Alps strayed to the Pyrenees, and those who concentrated their energies on these mountains did so in a kind of vacuum, making their own advances and their own mistakes. Alpenstocks were the order of the day. If ice-slopes were to be tackled a 'microscopic pocket-axe' or sharp piece of stone took the place of a climber's ice-axe. The rope was seldom seen, and for decades a good many guides absolutely refused to use one, on rock or ice or crevassed glacier. As for guides, Russell reckoned that at the time of Packe's first visits there were barely half-a-dozen good ones in the whole range. Luchon, where he started many of his explorations, boasted numerous so-called guides, but among them were few who knew more than their own immediate district, and fewer still who were prepared to accompany an enthusiastic amateur in the wilds of an uncharted country south of the frontier on the business of exploration.

Later, Packe was to offer recommendations and advice to the visiting climber on the choice of professional assistance; advice that actually tells as much about Victorian attitudes as about the guides themselves:

> 'Most of the Pyrenean guides have been spoilt by being allowed too much of their own way, and are very apt to assume the position of master rather than of servant; but with an Englishman, especially when they find he is not a novice among the mountains, they are soon brought into their proper place.'[2]

That being said, throughout the course of his long and industrious career he established a happy relationship with several guides; with Pierre Barrau of Luchon and Henri Passet of Gavarnie in particular.

In the early days a good number of his outings were solitary excursions, for he had already discovered whilst in the Alps that: 'Every peak he has climbed, every torrent he has forded . . . the mossy bank on which he has rested, and the distant crag which served as a landmark, will be long after familiar to the mind of him who by map and compass has found a track for himself.'[3] On occasion he had a companion and perhaps a porter to carry the baggage, but it was his preference to travel lightly and simply, more often than not sleeping out beneath the stars—upon summits as well as in the cradle of a valley—in his sheepskin sleeping bag. This was his own invention, a bag weighing 3.5kg that saw service on countless night bivouacs, and one that was eagerly copied by Count Henry Russell, who wrote of it: '. . . A sleeping bag is the best friend of a Pyrenean mountaineer; he cannot do without it. We never had a tent.'[4] Years later, W P Haskett-Smith, who was shown the ways of the mountains by Packe with several journeys among the Pyrenees, reminisced in humorous mood:

> 'When I first made the acquaintance of this celebrated bag, it had been in existence and use more than twenty years, and had lost a good deal of its warmth and weatherproof qualities. It had also shrunk and stiffened with age, till at last the inventor became quite unable to get inside it without assistance of the most vigorous kind . . . He would sit on the ground while we—a guide, a porter or two, and myself—formed a circle round him. His feet were then cautiously insinuated into the bag . . . We then raised him to a vertical position, and seizing the top edges of the bag, jumped him up and

down until his weight gradually forced him down inside. We then lowered him gently to a recumbent altitude, where he remained like a mummy till we shook him out again in the morning.'[5]

Prior to 1859 Packe had made two or three visits to the Pyrenees, but in that year he began his detailed exploration of the range. Released by inheritance from the inconvenience of having to earn a living, he was able to spend six weeks or two months at a time in the mountains, and this flexibility ideally suited his thorough attention to detail.

He was at once attracted to the heart of the range where, just south of the frontier, the two highest massifs are to be found. Not only was he drawn to the task of unravelling the complexities of the Maladeta and Posets massifs, he quickly formed a passion for the rock-girt basins with their string of glistening tarns that form one of the approach routes by way of the Lac d'Oo and Port of the same name. By the side of one or other of these little lakes he would sleep out, and spend several days at a time climbing upon the surrounding mountains—Crabioules (3116m) in gathering storm, Perdiguère (3222m), thought, wrongly, to have been a first ascent, and Tusse de Montarque (2889m) with its magnificent views over a wild scene of glacier and tarn. Then, barely satisfied with his achievements, but content to know there would be a return, he would cross over to the Estos or Esera valleys to concentrate on bigger game.

His ascent in 1861 of Pic des Posets was only the third on record. It had twice before been climbed in 1856, both with Pierre Barrau as leading guide, and it was he who guided Packe on this occasion. Their base was the Cabane de Turmes, a rough shepherd's hut in the pastures of the Estos, but of this Packe was scathing: '. . . The weather must be very bad indeed before you are driven to take shelter in such a smoke-grimed, filthy den; and as there is plenty of wood at hand, most will prefer to light their bivouac fire, and make their resting-place to the lee of one of the boulder stones here scattered about.'[2]

Their route was the same as those of 1856, which meant climbing through the hanging valley of Batisielles, crossing the ridge at the head of it and entering the 'wild rocky plateau dotted with small tarns' known as the Valle de los Ibons, across which could now be seen the arching crest of Posets. Once over this plateau, the upper step of the massif was gained with its glacier serving as a ramp to reach the base of the arête up which a scramble on unstable rocks would lead to the summit. From the cabane to the summit occupied some six hours of activity, but on the descent Packe studied the plunging Coma de la Paül that fell away to the north into a gorge, with its glacier flowing into the Estos, and conceived an alternative route which, he reckoned, would be more direct and quicker than that already taken. Two years later he returned and pioneered the first ascent by way of the Coma de la Paül, the route now taken as the *voie normale*.

Among the peaks and hanging valleys of the Maladeta Packe's industry was at its height. He climbed Aneto—culminating point not only of the Maladeta, but of the Pyrenean range—on several separate occasions and by various routes, each time noting in the summit register barometric pressure and other detail. He ascended many of its satellite peaks too, and made searching journeys

across previously untrodden passes. In July 1864, for example, he made one such crossing of the Col de Salenques with William Mathews, one of the founding fathers of the AC. On 8 July they left Luchon in the company of two local guides, Bertrand Lafont and his partner on the Posets, Pierre Barrau, and made for the Esera by way of the Hospice de France and Port de Venasque. Overnight they bivouacked near the Trou de Toro and set out next morning for the steep and narrow Valle de Barrancs with the snowy Col de Salenques at its head. This col (2810m) had never before been visited, but Packe was to find it a superb belvedere from which to survey the SE corner of the massif, with a firm granite ridge extending westwards from it to link with the southern ridge of Aneto. South-east of the col a valley plunged away into the unseen depths of the Ribagorzana, but Packe and his party traversed the head of it and crossed a second col which brought them directly to the south of the main peaks. They were now at the head of what Packe called the valley of Néthou, which they began to descend until they found their way blocked by two steep faces of rock between which the river spent itself in a cascade. They then had to climb back towards the col, then bore away to cross a third col into a branch of the valley of Castanese. That night they slept at the granges of Castanese, ten hours from the Trou de Toro, exclusive of halts.

Such an outing as this was meat to the appetite of a mountain explorer, and Packe was well content with the achievement. It taught him much about this unsung land and its complexity. He wrote of this expedition that he was '. . . much pleased with the varied character of the country, and at the same time so puzzled with the complicated arrangements of the different gorges which trend south from the Maladetta, and are not as yet mapped, that I decided to give a portion of last summer (1865) to thoroughly exploring and, as far as I could, surveying them.'[6]

So it was that in the summer of 1865 he began what Russell called '. . . his greatest service to the geography of the loftiest part of Aragon . . . his admirable map of the Monts Maudits, of which the whole credit is due to him alone.' With neither predecessors nor books to guide him he '. . . conscientiously explored and mapped . . . no less than 1000 square kilometres, where none but chamois hunters had trodden before him.'[4]

Between 14 July and 14 September 1865 he spent 31 days around the Maladeta, mostly on the southern side based near the head of the delectable Valhiverna (Malibierne). In those 31 days he slept in a house only twice, when he went for a replenishment of supplies. With him at various times were Captain Barnes, with whom he made the first ascent of the Picos de Valhiverna (3067m), Firmin Barrau (brother to his guide of previous years) and a chamois hunter, Charles Gouchan. For seven days in August Russell also joined him, when they bivouacked beside the Rio Bueno tarns. It was, first and foremost, an expedition to survey the Maladeta, but Packe had no theodolite with him. He explained his method of working: '. . . the position of the different points was determined by very numerous observations carefully taken with a prismatic compass. The elevations were determined by sympiesometer, aneroid and boiling-point thermometers; the two former instruments being always checked and adjusted by the latter.'[6]

Concentrating on one area for an extended period brought Packe considerable pleasure. His base in the Valhiverna was set in the midst of beautiful park-like scenery; at the Rio Bueno tarns there were trout to catch in the evenings; there were clear streams and flowers everywhere; he caught sight of ibex, which had previously been thought extinct here; and he had all the excuses he needed to explore every crag and corrie that attracted his attention. In addition to making the first ascent of the Picos de Valhiverna and the crossing of unknown cols, he also found a new route to the summit of Aneto by way of the Valle and Collado de Coronas. He climbed a neighbouring peak to that of the Picos de Valhiverna which he called Pic Papaver (Tuqueta Arnau, 2810m), and then worked out a new route from the barren shores of the Lago de Cregüeña to the Renclusa cave by way of a very high col in the Maladeta's western ridge. At the Renclusa he was weather-bound for two days with Mrs Barnes, Edward Wilmot, Miss Tong and the guide Jean Estrujo—and a fresh stock of supplies. When the weather improved he accompanied the party to the top of Aneto—making his fifth ascent—and then returned to Luchon to check the calculations for his surveys with M Toussaint Lézat before setting out once more for the Valhiverna.

The map was published in the following year, and although it quite naturally contained unavoidable errors, it remains to this day one of the more accomplished pieces of cartography seen in the Spanish Pyrenees; eloquent witness to his strict attention to detail.

East of the Maladeta, and separated from it by the depths of the Noguera Ribagorzana, there lies a very fine patch of wild country; a high landscape of scattered tarns and jutting granite peaks. Its western wall contains the highest summits, all rising from the long Besiberri ridge and culminating in Pic de Coma lo Forno (3033m), while to the north the sentry-like Montarto d'Aran (2830m) overlooks the chequered meadows of the Vall d'Aran. It is a splendid wilderness area on which many must have gazed from peaks to the west. Packe certainly had. He wrote of '. . . the tumultuous and billowy forms of the mountains of Catalonia. Beautiful and purple tinted as they appear in the evening light; not a trace of verdure can be seen upon those stony ridges, for the narrow vallies lie deep-concealed and far between.'[7] Quite naturally the very unknown quantity of these mountains appealed to Packe's questioning mind. He resolved to explore at least a portion of them.

With two companions and three porters to carry supplies, Packe again left Luchon, crossed into the Esera and spent an exposed night of storm near the Trou de Toro. Soaked through and with all his supplies drenched, he none the less set out in mist and rain the next day to cross the Col de Salenques and descend into the Ribagorzana. Turning north in the valley, Packe then found a tributary stream coming from the right, with a narrow path leading in an hour or so to a small lake (Lago de Besiberri, 1992m). He was delighted. There were trout. There was an abundant supply of wood for fuel, and a decent cabane for shelter. 'The mountains around, though very rugged and abrupt, are not too difficult, being entirely of granite.' There was a shepherd at the cabane who knew every nook and corner of his valley, but could give no information whatsoever as to the country beyond the surrounding mountains. He thought

the name of the peak at the head of the valley was Pic de Montarto, and this was accepted by Packe.

With one of his companions deciding to return to Luchon and the porters being unwilling to go farther, Packe's explorations continued in the company of Sir E Dashwood. They forced their way to the upper reaches of the valley where they found 'vast snow slopes; in many places overlying blue ice', then climbed the rocks leading on to the ridge. There they made the first ascent of one of the Besiberri peaks (Packe thought it was the Montarto), only to find another even higher. They climbed this also, but felt that the highest point was probably situated near the centre of the northern ridge and declined to attempt it. (The highest point is actually at the southern end of the ridge, but confusion is easy to understand.)

Packe and Dashwood descended the eastern slopes, glissading down a long snowfield to a little tarn, then worked a way down through a narrow gorge to the boulder-strewn grasslands of the Rio Malo. Caldas de Bohi lies another hour and a half below this, and there they passed a comfortable night. When they returned to the Rio Malo they continued up to the confusing headland where countless lakes are strung one to another by dancing streams, and shapely peaks loom in every direction. It was all unknown territory, even to the Spanish shepherds and, said Packe, 'most of the peaks, and the lakes, are anonymous.' Together they wandered over grassy cols and rocky cols, climbing to new levels, descending to others. And everywhere they found lakes. In some there were fish, but when they came to Estany de Mar (which Packe called the Lac de l'Isle on account of the island in its midst) and their provisions were low, they found none to catch. 'It was the more provoking as on that day our dinner almost entirely depended on our sport.'

This region brought him immense pleasure; it was, he felt, 'freed from the trammels of guides and guidebooks, the excursionist here feels himself thrown on his own resources; and . . . the explorer may here find scope for that spirit of discovery; which, though innate in us all, we can scarcely hope to evoke, among the higher, more difficult, but more trodden peaks of the Alps and the Pyrenees.'

But it was not only in the heart of the range that Packe was active, for he ventured far and wide, on both sides of the frontier. He explored the Balaitous, one of the more savage corners of the Pyrenees, and made the second ascent of it (the first from the west) after John Ball had failed in his attempt. He made a rediscovery of the fantastic Ordesa Canyon—almost 60 years after Ramond de Carbonnières first ventured into it—and delved into the neighbouring Anisclo canyon; discovered the Brèche d'Arazas leading from Ordesa to Fanlo; made a novel route from Gavarnie to Luchon finishing with the crossing of the Port de Gistain and Port d'Oo. He made the first ascent of Pic Carlitte (with Russell) and first tourist ascent of Pic de la Munia in the Cirque de Troumouse. He made a partially new route on the Vignemale by way of the Crête du Montferrat, and an interesting route from the Port de Gistain to Port d'Enfer by way of the Port de Clarabide. And everywhere he went his eyes were alert to the plants that grew on cliff and pasture.

He was an ardent botanist, having caught the enthusiasm of John Ball for

mountain plants on a very early climbing trip in the Lake District. It was botany that took him to the Sierra Nevada, and nearly all of his numerous articles dealing with the Pyrenees contain sections devoted to the flora of specific regions. In his *Guide* he actually lists 117 of the principal plants to be found between Lac d'Oo (1504m) and Port d'Oo (2908m), and the accounts of many of his climbs are brightened by mention of wayside flowers. It is believed by some that the classic tale *In Hanging Garden Gully* was inspired by Packe, and this is easy to believe when we find that W P Haskett-Smith once wrote that he and Packe climbed together in the Lake District, '. . . but never except in pursuit of a flower.'[8] Haskett-Smith remembered, too, that Packe '. . . had a positive passion for a plant called *Subularia aquatica* which grows under water in shallow lakes, and I can recall many an hour spent in searching for the wretched thing, paddling about in a biting wind, only to be released when the rain fell heavily enough to churn up the surface of the water and render further search useless.'

His other great passion in life was dogs. In particular, Pyrenean mountain dogs, of which he had several over the years. His devotion to them was peculiar, to say the least. On one occasion he visited Spratt's factory to be shown the production of dog biscuits. Invited by the manufacturer to lunch he sat at table, declined the lavish hospitality about to be served, and insisted: 'No sir! What is good enough for my dogs is good enough for me. Please let me have one of the biscuits which you supply to my kennel.'[8]

He took one or more of his dogs on various expeditions in the mountains. Like Coolidge in the Alps, whose little dog Tschingel accompanied him on numerous climbs, Packe took his dogs to the summit of many mountains and on solitary travels often went to the lengths of roping himself between two of them as a safeguard when crossing frozen lakes or crevassed glaciers. With his dogs he shared the empty silence of the mountains. They brought him companionship through the nights of lonely bivouac and were with him to greet the spangled dawn.

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