
Art and Literature

WALT UNSWORTH

A Brief History of Mountain Illustration

While mountain adventures can often be described graphically in words, the shape and form of mountains are less easy to describe without the description becoming tedious. The Cima di Brenta in the Dolomites and the Aiguille du Géant in the Mont Blanc range can both be described as awe-inspiring towers of vertical rock, hundreds of feet high, yet any climber will tell you they are fundamentally different; you could never mistake one for the other. Saying that the Cima is limestone and the other granite is all very well, but to most readers that conveys very little. The whole problem can be solved by a picture and the difference between the two towers becomes at once apparent even to the non-specialist.

The usefulness of illustrations was recognised right from the start of mountain literature and some illustrators even went to the extent of faking them to look more dramatic. Pictorial hyperbole was often the rule rather than the exception. I once came across an etching of a crag called the Buckstone in an old book on Northern England. The picture showed a towering pinnacle which I did not recognise although I knew the area well. How could I have missed a rock of such dramatic quality? I decided to go and search for it, and discovered it to be a lump of stone about ten feet high set in a hedge. The artist's imagination had certainly got the better of him. In the Alps, imagination ran riot in the early days; there are some splendid engravings of the dragons which roared amongst the peaks. It was avalanches doing the roaring, but avalanches are difficult to illustrate and dragons look better and sell more books.

There are many superb examples of such engravings in the old books but there's a fine collection of modern reproductions in *Mont Blanc Chamonix Courmayeur in Old Prints* by Gherardo Priuli whose second English edition, translated by John Iliffe, appeared in 1987. This splendid work, which is necessarily expensive, concentrates on Mont Blanc but many of the pictures are in full colour and a large size, beautifully and faithfully reproduced.

Even the great Edward Whymper was not above stretching a point or two. In his famous book *Scrambles Amongst the Alps* (1871) he illustrated a dramatic incident on the descent of the Écrins in which the great guide Almer made a daring leap across a gap in the ridge. A few years later the Alpine historian, W A B Coolidge, writing Almer's obituary, claimed that the incident never took place. As neither Whymper nor Coolidge were noted for having an even temper, a furious row broke out, reverberating around the halls of the Alpine Club until the end of the century. Whymper sought to justify his case by bringing out a sixteen-page pamphlet repeating the

story and reproducing the picture. The booklet, *Letter Addressed to Members of the Alpine Club*, is quite rare.

The argument over Almer's Leap was one of the earliest of those spectacular rows which periodically shake the mountain world. Whymper was always keen on the pennies and a cynic might argue the controversy was a way of keeping the book in the public eye. *Scrambles* has run into many editions and has seldom, if ever, been out of print, but curiously enough the picture of Almer's Leap does not appear in every edition. Whymper was one of the best engravers and one of the most prolific. He illustrated several other books besides his own monumental works, including Grove's *Frosty Caucasus* and Tyndall's *Mountaineering in 1861*.

Engravings continued in use for many years, most of them very accurate portrayals of the mountains. Paintings, too, were used as illustration. One of the earliest, from 1865, is Gilbert and Churchill's *The Dolomite Mountains* with illustrations by Josiah Gilbert, mostly in full colour. Gilbert was a portrait painter and his representation of the Dolomite crags is rather heavy-handed, and the colours, printed by chromo-lithography, coarse. The black-and-white illustrations are wood engravings by Whymper.

Much better paintings of the Dolomites are to be found in W A Baillie Grohmann's *Tyrol* (1908) and Reginald Farrer's *The Dolomites* (1913), both with illustrations by Harrison Compton, who is given equal billing with the authors on the covers, and rightly so. Compton was the son of Edward Theodore Compton, one of the finest mountain painters of the Edwardian era, and certainly in the top half dozen of British mountain painters, though he lived most of his life in Bavaria. He illustrated many German books, notably Emil Zsigmondy's *Im Hochgebirge* (1889). For the German Alpine Club's *Zeitschrift* he did no fewer than 370 illustrations between 1883 and 1912. Father and son together compiled a volume of 24 coloured plates entitled *Berchtesgaden*, published in 1923 after the father's death. It must be pretty scarce; I've never seen a copy.

One of the most unusual covers of the period is that of another Dolomite book, Amelia B Edwards' *Untrodden Peaks and Unfrequented Valleys*, first published in 1873 and reprinted several times, which has a gloriously illustrated cover, charmingly naive, from the author's own sketch, in colour and heavy gilt. She became a noted conservationist, particularly in the field of Egyptology.

In Martin Conway's book *The Alps* (1904) there are paintings of very mixed quality by A D McCormick, some of them verging on impressionism, without quite making it. His 'Evening in Zermatt' is reminiscent of Toulouse Lautrec, while 'The Pier at Scherzligen' has overtones of a Whistler 'Nocturne'. Nevertheless, the seventy pictures make this a fascinating example of the illustrated book. McCormick had been responsible for illustrating a much earlier, more important and more expensive Conway book, *Climbing and Exploration in the Karakoram-Himalayas* (1894) but the three hundred illustrations in that are not in colour.

Photography had been around for many years but reproduction was difficult in a printed book. The easiest method was to 'tip in', or print the photos separately and then stick them in the book, a method sometimes used with colour pictures too. In the *Alpine Journal*, photographs were not used until 1882 (Vol X) when a photograph of the Nadelgrat in the Pennine Alps, taken by Donkin, appeared as a tipped-in panorama. From then on photos were used sparingly, alongside the usual engravings. There were, of course, many fine mountain photographers of whom Donkin was one.

The real pioneers in this art, however, were the American photographers who accompanied the surveys of the West led by surveyors such as Fremont and Hayden. Carleton E Williams first photographed the astonishing scenery of Yosemite in 1863 and within a few years his pictures were internationally famous. Others of great skill were William Henry Jackson and Timothy O'Sullivan. Jackson's famous picture 'The Mount of the Holy Cross' taken in 1873 in the Sawatch Range of Colorado was so astonishingly perfect – the great white snow cross on a dark mountain – that rivals claimed it had been touched up, and it seems that the snow-filled 'cross' – two gullies crossing – was never seen in such perfect condition again. In recent years all these early American photographers have had books devoted to their work, but as far as I know there are no early printed books.

Among the early photographic books was Cunningham and Abney's *The Pioneers of the Alps* published in 1887, which describes the careers of various Alpine guides and is illustrated by Abney's beautiful portraits, never bettered in my opinion. Because the book is large format, the twenty-two portraits, each guarded by tissue paper, are particularly impressive and show the guides in their everyday costume, as if they had just come in off the hill or the field, which they probably had. Emile Rey looks every inch the rather superior sort of person he was – he was better off than most guides – whilst J A Carrel, Whymper's old adversary, has the intense face of a fiery patriot who had fought for Italy in more ways than one. Sir William de Wiveleslie Abney FRS was a pioneer of photography, especially the scientific uses of it, and he wrote a couple of handbooks for photographers.

Writers soon began to realise the importance of good illustrations in their books and in the early years outstanding examples are the books illustrated by Vittorio Sella, the doyen of the grand mountain scene, whose pictures of K2 and other Karakoram giants and of the Alaskan peaks, taken when he was on the Duke of the Abruzzi's expeditions to these regions, are superb. Equally fine are his illustrations in Freshfield's two-volume work *The Exploration of the Caucasus*, 77 beautiful plates protected by tissue. Freshfield's previous work on the Caucasus *The Central Caucasus and Bashan*, published nearly thirty years earlier, had been illustrated by Whymper's engravings. Sella's work fetches a premium today, and the Freshfield volumes will set you back almost a thousand pounds.

Many of the early pictures, including those of Abney and Sella mentioned above, were reproduced by photogravure, a process which is akin in many

ways to engraving and gives deep rich tones, usually black, although any colour ink could be used, and sepia was popular. It was invented by Karl Klick of Vienna in 1879 and gives the closest approximation to the original print, with none of the 'dots' of the half-tone screen so readily seen with a magnifying glass in most illustrations. This is not the place to go too deeply into printing techniques but in the more common half-tone process, pictures are 'screened' onto a printing block and the finer the screen the finer the dots on the picture, and the better the reproduction. Photogravure does away with this; there are no 'dots' and the reproduction is superb. The process is so expensive it is rarely used today.

Two English photographers of the same period were George and Ashley Abraham, known as the 'Keswick Brothers' because they lived in that Lakeland town. They were good cragsmen and they teamed up with Owen Glynn Jones, one of the best climbers of his day, to produce a book about Lake District climbing illustrated with fine collotype pictures – a process similar to photogravure in effect but without the same quality or richness. Jones was killed on the Dent Blanche in 1899 but the brothers went on to make several more books, mostly instructional, some of which were reprinted well into the middle of the 20th century. They were adept at showing climbers in action.

The *Alpine Journal*, though calling the pictures 'accurate and beautiful', thought one of them – A Winter Afternoon on Mickledore Ridge – was 'faked and tilted'. Fortunately the Abrahams ignored this base accusation. Had it been Whymper he might have sued. A good collection of Abraham pictures, ninety-six plates in total, was published by Alan Hankinson in 1972 under the title *Camera on the Crags*.

By the 1930s there were few mountaineering books which did not have illustrations, though for the most part the pictures were unexceptional. In England only Frank Smythe brought anything like art to the mountain scene and since he was a good writer his books were immensely popular; he was probably the first mountaineer to live off his writings since Whymper. On the Continent there were some fine books from this period, often illustrated by photogravure. One in my collection is Luis Trenker's *Meine Berge* published in Berlin in 1931, superbly illustrated with pictures reminiscent of Gaston Rébuffat's post-war work, though one should not push the comparison too far.

In the post-war era, picture books began to come into their own. Early on the scene were Smythe and W A Poucher, whose books reflected the eternal hills rather than dramatic action. I knew Poucher well though I could never discover why he insisted on being called Walter when his name was actually William. A big man, he was an expert pianist and one of the world's leading perfumiers – his book on perfumes is the standard work, or was a few years ago. He would wait for hours to get just the right lighting conditions and was a devotee of the Leica, as compared with Smythe who preferred a 6x6 format. Smythe ranged further afield, tackling the Himalaya and Canadian

Rockies for example, whereas Poucher portrayed the Alps, but mostly the British hills. He later wrote a popular series of hikers' guidebooks, using his photographs to illustrate the routes, possibly the first time this had been done in a practical pocketbook.

Douglas Milner, who had written a text-book *Mountain Photography* in 1945, also produced three picture books in the 1950s: *Rock for Climbing* (1950), *The Dolomites* (1951) and *Mont Blanc and the Aiguilles* (1955). All these have excellent photographs, both scenic and action, though the climbs featured are much easier than those usually shown in later books of this genre. They were not appreciated at the time; I picked up my copy of *Rock for Climbing* for about 50p when it was remaindered – and drooled over it for weeks. I had never seen anything like it before but I was very young! Douglas was ahead of his time in this and so was his publisher, Robert Hale. Once, when I was a young author looking for pictures to illustrate a book I had written about the Victorian climber Mummery, Doug came to the rescue with some great pictures of the Aiguilles.

The idea of a large format picture book-cum-guidebook, for the library shelf rather than the rucksack, was begun on the continent by Walter Pause who did a series of beautiful guides to the various Alpine regions. Each route consisted of a double-page spread, one page being the picture and the other a brief description of the route, with a little map. The pictures were monochrome and routes were either climbing or walking, depending on the book in question. Unfortunately only two of these were translated into English from the original German – *Salute the Mountains* (1959, trans. 1962) which was subtitled *100 Walks in the Alps*, and much later, in 1979, *Extreme Alpine Rock*. Both books show rock faces at their most architectural, an effect enhanced by the use of black and white.

The revolution in printing and production methods which accelerated from the 1970s onwards has meant that colour could be produced much more cheaply. This has led to a proliferation of large-format colour books on mountaineering and though this is a good thing on the whole, it means that publishers can afford to be less discriminating. Frankly, there has been some awful rubbish produced.

Towards the end of the black-and-white era mention must be made of the excellent action book by Tony Smythe and John Cleare, published in 1966, *Rock Climbers in Action in Snowdonia*. Smythe is the son of Frank Smythe, so there's a certain continuity here – though in this case the pictures were done by Cleare, one of Britain's outstanding mountain photographers of the period. He first came to notice when he illustrated my own *The English Outcrops* (1964) – just a few plates – but went on to produce many books of his own as both author and illustrator.

In this modern period there are far too many books to mention even all the good ones. All we can do is look at trends and outstanding series, picture books which I feel have been influential. Gaston Rébuffat was one of the great French post-war climbers who climbed all the great North Faces of

the Alps and was part of the expedition which climbed Annapurna. He was a good photographer and writer. I first came across his work when I was in Chamonix in the late 1950s and purchased *Neige et Roc*, a signed copy, from the Tiarraz photo shop. It was a superb instruction book, lavishly illustrated in colour and monochrome and far beyond any similar English language book at the time. It was later translated into English as *On Snow and Rock* (1963) and then *On Ice and Snow and Rock* (1971). A present-day young climber would probably regard it old-fashioned, as regards clothes and techniques – no harnesses, long ice-axes and so on – but there is a joyous freedom about it redolent of that period of climbing. I knew Rébuffat later on and we corresponded. He sent me copies of the new guide series he was doing with the French firm Denoël; a lovely series but only one, *The Mont Blanc Massif* (1975), was translated into English.

Also around this time, Ken Wilson turned from editing the magazine *Mountain*, to book publishing. *Mountain*, which succeeded the out-dated *Mountain Craft*, set new standards in mountaineering journalism, particularly in illustration and layout. This reflected Wilson's training in architectural photography and he brought the same rigorous approach to the books he published: *Hard Rock*, *Classic Rock*, and several similar titles, which were akin to the Pause books in concept, but done more lavishly. They were predominantly in black and white – the architectural photographer again – but Ken got some of the best names in mountaineering to write the articles, people like Chris Bonington, John Hunt and Royal Robbins who seemed not to mind the appallingly low fees because they knew Ken would do a prestigious job. First editions are collectors' items now. Ken was and remains an outspoken, even contentious character and as I once said in a speech, while presenting him with an award: 'When Ken pours oil on troubled water it is simply so he can set light to it.' Even so, he is probably the most influential figure in mountain publishing to emerge in the post-war years.

The quality of present-day picture books depends not only on the modern techniques of production and design but also on the quality of the pictures themselves. There are some truly outstanding photographers around now, best exemplified, to my mind, by the work of Galen Rowell. Anyone interested in mountain photography should study Rowell's books, which are large format and superbly produced, particularly *Mountain Light* (1986) in which he chronicles his personal growth as a photographer.

Many years ago Rowell and I had a spat in an American magazine. The correspondence sallied back and forth for several issues like a ping-pong ball, with others joining in. One reader even admitted that the only reason he bought the magazine was to keep up with the lively – in fact, acrimonious – correspondence between Unsworth and Rowell. We had never met but shortly afterwards a knock came to my door and much to my surprise there was Galen on the doorstep. 'Thought we'd better meet,' he said grinning. We've been good friends ever since.