History

Rowan Huntley *Store Skagastolstind ~ Fading Light, July*
Chroma on board, 40cm x 30cm. (*Private collection*)
On 1 November 1907 Norwegian climbers received a sensational telegram:

_Happily we have completed our expedition to Kabru (20th October), placing the Norwegian flag at the highest point so far reached by alpinists in the Himalaya, that is at an approximate altitude of 23,900ft. Rubenson and Monrad-Aas._

The climb to within 100ft of the summit of this outlier of Kangchenjunga by two 20-year olds on their first trip to the Himalaya was an astounding achievement and provided the inspiration for the founding of Norway’s own alpine club – the Norsk Tindeklub (NTK) – which this year celebrated its centenary.

The news of the Kabru climb was also published in Oslo’s biggest newspapers, _Morgenbladet_ and _Aftenposten_. This prompted a somewhat sour comment by the Swedish climber Eric Ullén in the following day’s _Morgenbladet_, in which he recalled WW Graham’s claim to have reached 23,965ft on Kabru in 1883 before being turned back by an ice cliff. Carl Wilhelm Rubenson and Monrad-Aas seemed not to have exceeded the altitude reached by Graham, concluded Ullén, who also pointed out that the altitude record was held by the American William Hunter Workman for his ascent of ‘Pyramide Peak’ (23,964m) in Pakistan. Was it too hard for the Swede to put up with the Norwegian success?

Graham’s claim on Kabru has since been regarded as a case of mistaken identity, and the first undisputed ascent to the 24,002ft summit was by CR Cooke in 1935. Rubenson at first hesitated about the correctness of the supposedly fast ascent by Graham but later on, when other expeditions showed it was possible to move rapidly even at higher altitudes, he was inclined to support Graham’s claim. Record or not, Rubenson and Monrad-Aas’s climb, without guides, was a milestone in Himalayan mountaineering.

During the latter part of the 19th century, mountaineering in Norway was dominated by foreigners, principally by Englishmen. William Cecil Slingsby, rightly known as ‘the father of Norwegian mountaineering’, visited the country for the first time in 1872. His ascent four years later of Store Skagastølstind in the Hurrungarne group, together with Norwegians Emanuel Mohn and Knut Lykken, was the starting point of an intensive period of ascents among the virgin peaks of the Jotunheimen. Slingsby was also the first to go by ski in Jotunheimen. Besides the Englishmen, the
Dane Carl Hall (1848-1908) was a great pioneer doing many first ascents throughout Norway.

At first the visitors were guided by people with local geographic knowledge but little mountaineering skill. However, Carl Hall was very anxious to teach the locals the basics of mountaineering and gradually they became more and more experienced. Together with Slingsby, he instructed the first professional guides: Ola Berge, Torgeir Sulheim and Mathias Soggemoen. Training took place in the early 1890s at Turtagri:i, open moorland long used for summer grazing, in magnificent surroundings of sharp peaks and shining glaciers. In 1888 two hotels were built here, one belonging to Ola Berge and the other to Ola Öine. Besides the hotel keeping, both were devoted to the economically lucrative business of guiding and Turtagri:i soon became a centre for mountaineering. Sadly, one of the hotels burned down in the winter of 2005 but has since been rebuilt.

At the turn of the century keen Norwegian youngsters with ‘mountains in their eyes’ became more common at Turtagri:i. Among them were Eilert Sundt, who in 1900 joined Slingsby for a new route on Midre Skagastölstind, the legendary women mountaineer Therese Bertheau, and Alf Bryn, Carl Rubenson, Ferdinand Schjelderup and Henning Tönberg who together would dominate the Norwegian climbing scene for 20 years, doing many notable first ascents. The ever-enthusiastic Slingsby, at this time around 50 years old, enjoyed climbing with the young tigers. In an obituary in the NTK journal of 1933, Schjelderup emphasised their friendship with Slingsby: ‘With his catching enthusiasm, he inspired us to new ascents and at the same time he shared with us his exceptional topographical knowledge. But above all, he opened our eyes to interesting features and the immense beauty of the nature that we otherwise would never have been aware of. And this is the most important thing for feeling truly at home in the mountains.’

The Swede Erik Ullen and Dane Egil Rostrup were very active at this time, with several important first ascents, pushing climbing standards and safe rope management. Gradually a number of ascents were done without guides; of course it saved expenses but most important was the personal challenge. The new generation had a strong desire to find their own way and new routes in the mountains.

The ‘boat’ built on this intensive climbing in the Hurrungarne group and on the small crags around Oslo was then launched with the achievement on Kabru and in April 1908 the Norwegian Alpine Club (NTK) was founded. The model was the Alpine Club. Only established Norwegian male alpinists could be accepted as members – Ullen and Rostrup were thus excluded as foreigners. In 1909 Slingsby and Therese Bertheau were elected as honorary members. Today the NTK has about 500 members. In 1975 it was opened to women and in 1999 to foreigners. The Club retains the ethical heritage of Cecil Slingsby, its central objective being to promote alpinism with awareness of nature and without leaving traces.
160. Left
CW Rubenson
(*DNT Yearbook, 1908*)

161. Below
Slingsby (left), Rob Baker (centre) and Rubenson in Hurrungarne, 1908.
(*NTK archives*)
The ascent of Kabru is described in the journal of the Norwegian Mountain Touring Association (DNT) of 1908, in the NTK journal of 1914, and in the Alpine Journal. In autumn 1906, Rubenson and Monrad-Aas embarked on the long journey by boat to India. Monrad-Aas was well trained, but with no alpine experience. However, according to Rubenson, he was a born alpinist.

Of Rubenson himself, who became an honorary member of the AC, I know a little more; he was my grand-mother's second cousin. Born into a prominent Jewish family in Stockholm in 1885, Carl Wilhelm's mother was Norwegian and his father Swedish. Aged one, he moved with his mother to Oslo, and there, while at college, he met Ferdinand Schjelderup with whom he started climbing.

On attaining his majority, Rubenson received a legacy that allowed him to live a more or less economically untroubled life. He began studies to become an architect but the journey to the Himalaya changed his life from an academically orientated direction to one of alpinism and business. From 1920 he worked as an advertising consultant and as a freelance journalist. He was interested in literature and wrote a splendid essay on life and nature in Kashmir and also small lyric poems as well as many articles on mountaineering.

It doesn't seem that Rubenson and Monrad-Aas had any information about Freshfield's celebrated circuit of the Kangchenjunga massif in 1898 or knowledge of other ascents in the Himalaya. Any idea about which mountain to attempt was very vague. When the pair inquired in Calcutta about possibilities, puzzled inhabitants either shrugged their shoulders or shook their heads; going to the high mountains in midwinter – impossible and stupid!

Eventually Sikkim emerged the best choice – probably their only choice as it was one of the few areas in the region where Europeans had permission to go and was also known to offer relatively safe travelling. The six-week journey to the base of Kabru gave Rubenson and Monrad-Aas a useful taste of Sikkim and of expedition life, but it was obvious that a serious attempt on the mountain would have to wait until autumn 1907. During spring and summer they undertook a long journey in the East. 'This was not the right kind of training for mountaineers as the heat encouraged us to be lazy beyond measure,' wrote Rubenson.

By the end of August preparation for the expedition was in full progress. Bags, sacks, clothing, blankets, sleeping bags, tents and other necessaries were piled in their hotel room. Rubenson laid particular stress on having the right equipment for porters.

On 16 September the two Norwegians left Darjeeling, accompanied by 100 porters and a Scot called Mason who joined as an interpreter. Base camp was established on the Rothong glacier (16,000ft) from where, on 7 October, Rubenson, Monrad-Aas and '14 of the best coolies' set off with
four tents and supplies for one week. Three camps later they reached 22,000ft where they rested and acclimatised for three days. The weather was excellent, and on a calm day with a clear sky, Rubenson, Monrad-Aas and two Sherpas made what they hoped would be a final push.

‘But the day was very hot; we felt very lazy and when we tapped the ridge connecting the north-eastern peak of Kabru with the Dome, we sat down, smoked our pipes, enjoyed the beautiful view and decided to have our tents brought up a bit higher the next day.’

A tent was brought up to 22,600ft; however weariness and hunger were taking their toll. Rubenson confessed to losing all taste for ox tongue and the only thing that would keep their ‘pecker up’ was brandy – ‘even in this matter the coolies were at one with us’. On 20 October they made a last attempt, the one Sherpa who set out with them turning back with hunger pangs, leaving Rubenson and Monrad-Aas for the first time ‘quite alone’. Battling strong winds, they had to choose a sheltered but steeper, icier route directly up towards the north-east peak. Great care was needed cutting steps as they had had to discard their nailed boots because freezing nails made them too cold to wear.

Rubenson reckoned he and Monrad-Aas were fifty or sixty feet below the summit when they turned back. The sun was touching the horizon, their teeth were chattering violently in the cold and the wind had hit them with such force that they dared not continue. They looked at each other and at the snow ridge slightly rising towards the long-desired white top-dome, so close and still unattainable. The descent was at times dramatic, with Rubenson being saved from a serious fall by an observant Monrad-Aas.

Rubenson and Monrad-Aas had not got their longed-for sight of Kangchenjunga from the top of Kabru, but the magic attraction lived on. In 1909 Rubenson and Ferdinand Schjelderup travelled to London to seek permission to pass through Nepal and parts of India, but without success. On 6 December a British foreign minister wrote to his Norwegian counterpart regretting to inform him ‘that the objections by the Nepal government to all exploration by Europeans in Nepal render compliance with your request impossible’.

But Rubenson would not give up. In March 1911, thinking to try to get permission to visit Nepal once in India, he again left for Calcutta. A short note in *The Daily Telegraph* about his departure created alarm within the Norwegian government. Was there any possibility that the expedition would travel illegally in Nepal? The Ministry of Foreign Affairs cross-examined the chairman of the Tindeklub, Eilert Sundt, and their Norwegian representative in London, Benjamin Vogt, got in touch with Slingsby who returned a positive answer. Rubenson certainly would try to reach Kangchenjunga, but without passing through Nepal. However, Rubenson never got that far. Instead, he and his wife visited Kashmir and made first ascents of Potbury Peak (16,100 ft) and Snowy Peak (17,890 ft).
Consolation for Rubenson and Schjelderup after their unsuccessful visit to London in 1909 came with a journey north to the home of Cecil Slingsby, who, as enthusiastic as ever, opened their eyes to the possibilities of remarkable unclimbed routes in northern Norway, notably Stetind which he had attempted in 1904 with Wooley and Collie. Describing the visit in the DNT Yearbook of 1911, Schjelderup recalled asking Slingsby:

‘Those smooth slabs, are they that hard?’ The answer was immediate and short: ‘There is one and only one slab on Stetind, and it runs from the base to the top’. Slingsby turned to the photograph again, pointing out some weak structures that possibly could be defeated on the impressive ridge rising steeply towards the top.

The first ascent of Stetind in July 1910 by Rubenson, Schjelderup and H Jentoft, was the breakthrough for a decade of notable first ascents in northern Norway. During the summer the party also did a couple of first ascents in the Lofoten area and in 1912 the same trio gained the inaccessible Strandåtinden on Kjerringoy island north of Bodø. (See AJ 2001 for an excellent article about Strandåtind by Anders Lundahl). The climb, by the exposed west ridge, is remembered by Rubenson as the hardest and most demanding he had ever done. Ten days later the same party, together with Slingsby, ascended the mountain by its north ridge. In a letter written the following December, Slingsby commented: ‘I have been again in Arctic Norway climbing with Rubenson (of Kabru fame) and two other stalwart and young (comparatively with my 63 years) Norsemen.’

Further memorable first ascents for Rubenson were the long traverse of Børvasstinderne in the Beiarn area south of Bodø in 1916, with Schjelderup and W Morgenstierna, and the climb of the sharp-edged Piggtind in Lyngen, with Jensen and H Tönsberg. Five years later, with Tönsberg, Jensen and Jentoft, came firsts on Hatten in the Steigen area and Sildbottentind in the Narvik area.
Much has changed since Rubeson’s day and the founding of the Norwegian Alpine Club, but still the words of Doug Scott in *Big Wall Climbing* (1973) ring true:

> In Norway there exist not only vast areas of unclimbed rock, but also climbs in true wilderness surroundings. Very few valleys in northern Norway share the plight of Alpine valleys where commercial exploitation has brought the cities to the mountains. In Norway it is still possible to visit easily accessible valleys that have no roads running through them, not even footpaths leading to hotels and huts, and certainly no hoards of jostling climbers and trippers on conducted tours.

Hopefully it will be possible to continue to quote the same words in the future. Today it is more important than ever to conserve the possibilities of adventure in our lives.