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# History

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*Gervasutti Pillar, acrylic on canvas, 51x61cm. (Tim Pollard)*

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PETER FOSTER & GARETH JONES

## The Brenva Feud

Graham Brown vs Frank Smythe



The Brenva face of Mont Blanc by Basil Goodfellow.  
(*Alpine Club Photo Library*)

Smythe is a great man!' wrote Graham Brown in September 1927 after their successful ascent of the Sentinelle route, the first to be made on the Brenva Face of Mont Blanc.<sup>1</sup> The following year they climbed the Route Major, another new route on the face. These climbs were amongst the leading achievements of British mountaineers in the Alps between the Wars. But they never climbed together again and twenty-two years later Graham Brown would write to Smythe, saying: 'I hope you perish'<sup>2</sup>. Soon





Left: Frank Smythe, Everest expedition, 1933.  
(© *Royal Geographical Society*)

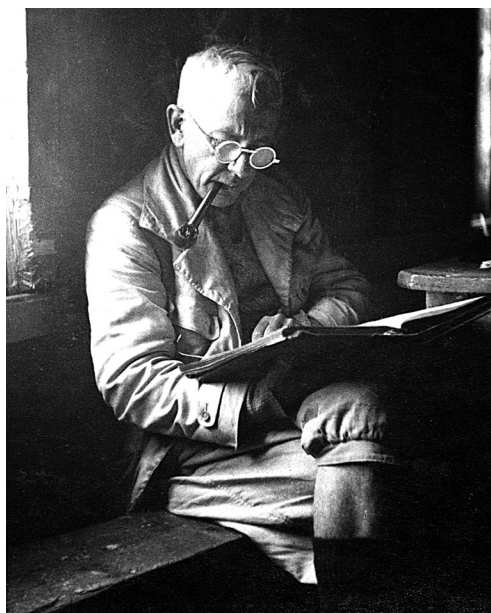
Below: T Graham Brown studying the Promontoire Hut logbook before traversing the Meije, 1933.  
(*Basil Goodfellow, Alpine Club Photo Library*)

after, Smythe left on a trip to India where he contracted cerebral malaria from which he died some weeks later. What occurred to rupture their partnership and fuel such rancour?

In August 1927, Graham Brown, 45, professor of physiology, recently distinguished by election to the fellowship of the Royal Society and in possession of a mountaineering dream, met Smythe, twenty years younger, discharged earlier in the year from the RAF as medically unfit, with a reputation to make and career to establish. Both men were at Montanvers and without climbing partners. Graham Brown's alpine experience was limited to standard routes, mainly with guides, whereas Smythe was already an accomplished alpinist who climbed without guides, but they agreed to join forces. Graham Brown had a burning desire to fulfil his dream of making a new route on Mont Blanc via the Brenva face, which he had cherished since his time on the Salonika front during the First World War. For Smythe, a new route on Mont

Blanc would provide a noteworthy climax to the book which he was planning to write based on his own exploits.

When they set out for the Brenva face, on 31 August, Graham Brown had the line of the Route Major in mind but Smythe, who had climbed the



Brenva spur some weeks earlier, was concerned about the risk of crossing the Great Couloir and the uncertainty of finding a way through the seracs above the final buttress and rejected it. Instead, they climbed the Sentinelle, the line of which Graham Brown had put forward as a *via media*, between the Route Major and Smythe's suggestion of the rock and snow rib, to the left of the Brenva Spur.

Smythe led the climb from their bivouac beneath the conspicuous red buttress which they named the Red Sentinel. Graham Brown wrote frankly concerning his ability to have led the climb, referring to himself as 'too much of a rabbit at the game for that.'<sup>3</sup> They celebrated their success with vintage wine and champagne in sufficient quantity that Graham Brown could not remember all the details of the latter part of the evening! During the succeeding months they maintained friendly relations but there were signs of the mutual antipathy that would fuel their later feud. They disagreed over the writing-up of their new route – Graham Brown proposed joint authorship but Smythe felt their styles were incompatible. Privately, Smythe was critical of Graham Brown's climbing abilities although he was more generous publicly, and wrote that 'the thought of a slip on the part of Graham Brown never entered my head.'<sup>4</sup> Smythe's light-hearted signing-off to a letter to Graham Brown reveals the undercurrent of feelings: 'Looking forward to our next scrap. My turn to draw blood next time.'<sup>5</sup>

On 6 and 7 August 1928 they climbed the Route Major. Although the cause of their subsequent feud was rooted in their personalities, it was the events that occurred on this route which provided the *casus belli*. But establishing what actually happened is problematical, since it was exactly these details that were the subject of their feud and each man made claims and counter-claims to support his version of events. Smythe was first into print with an article for *The Times* on 18 August in which, oddly, he completely omitted to name Graham Brown, referring to him anonymously, as 'a friend'. His subsequent, impressionistic account was also aimed at a general audience and appeared months later in *Blackwood's Magazine*. However, Graham Brown wrote a detailed letter to his friend and fellow Alpine Club member Professor Gask just two days after the ascent which, providing the advantage of immediacy and antedating any public discord, provides the most reliable source. The extracts quoted below are taken from this letter.<sup>6</sup>

The approach to the bivouac site beneath the Red Sentinel involved crossing a series of snow couloirs which proved more difficult than the previous year and caused Graham Brown some anxiety:

'... the avalanche run in the second couloir after passing over 'Moore's Col' was nearly impassable. It was about thirteen-and-a-half feet deep and the whole of the near side overhung. I let Smythe down into it on the rope. He cut the few steps across it and then up the other side. He then climbed well up on the other side and I had one of the worst ordeals of my life before me. He kept the rope tight and I lowered myself as best I could over the edge and then dropped onto the ice – 6 or 7 feet – which fortunately was somewhat melted. I then hung by the rope on it until I could cut a step and

so get up to Smythe's steps – then it was all over.'

They quit their bivouac just before 5am the following morning. Smythe led across the Great Couloir without incident and they climbed up over rocks and a series of snow and ice arêtes. The top of the upper ice ridge:

'... was exceedingly steep and involved a good deal of step cutting... Smythe cut the steps... the cutting must have occupied at least 45 minutes... (He cuts for long strides and then I come along cutting intermediate steps for my shorter legs! We were climbing in crampons).'

They reached the foot of the final buttress beneath the wall of seracs at 13.40. Their progress had been slow. They were carrying heavy loads but crucially they found it necessary to move one at a time for long stretches. The key to climbing the buttress appeared to be a short corner:

'... Smythe again cut across... into the corner which terminated in a 12-foot chimney. I came across to him (cutting additional steps in the brittle ice – I have never met anything like it before). Smythe tried the chimney and failed. I tried the chimney and failed. We thought this was the only way up and that the position was desperate. Smythe talked about retreat or an attempt to descend to the Great Couloir (under the seracs!) and gain the Sentinel route – I offered him a shoulder (in crampons!) he tried again and failed – coming down heavily on me and tearing my windjacket. He then gave me his shoulder, and I failed... I then suggested cutting round the descending rock rib... and did so.'

Smythe followed. Above, the lead changed hands as they prospected the route to the top of the buttress. Smythe led through the seracs which fortunately proved relatively straightforward. On the summit slopes they encountered strong winds which, according to Smythe, 'sent us staggering'<sup>7</sup> and Graham Brown wrote:

'... the gusts were terrific and I was blown over two or three times – and Smythe twice.'

They finally arrived at the summit of Mont Blanc at 20.20, fifteen hours after setting out from their bivouac. These, then, are the bare facts of the expedition. In a matter of weeks the opening shots of the feud were fired.

Smythe sent a letter to Graham Brown which was inflammatory in content and vitriolic in tone. Amongst other things, he accused Graham Brown of spreading lies, in particular, that Smythe had wanted to turn back on the climb and that it was Graham Brown's 'example and leadership [which] saved the situation'. Smythe countered:

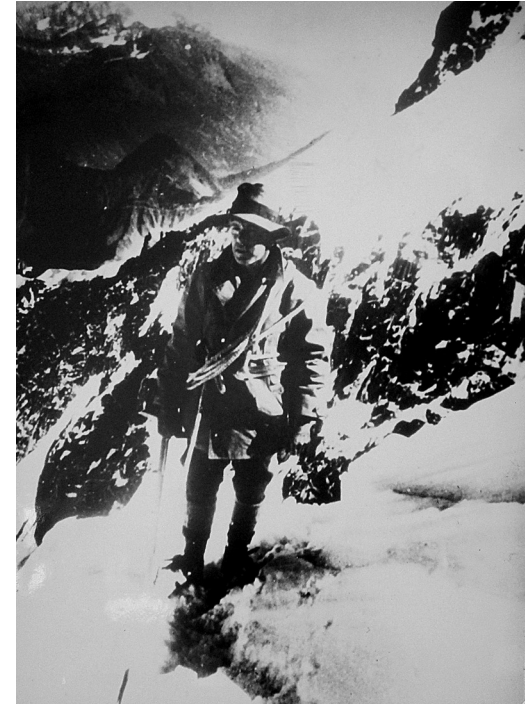
'That I suggested retreat at any point on the climb is utterly untrue... [and] you have... had the honour of being taken up two of the greatest climbs in the Alps – an honour which would not have occurred had you not met me...'<sup>8</sup>

Was Smythe traduced by Graham Brown or did he have something to hide? According to T S Blakeney, a friend of Smythe's who had joined him and Graham Brown for an attempt on Route Major some days before the successful ascent, Smythe had a premonition of death in 1928 and consequently was in a 'funny mood'<sup>10</sup>. He was 'highly-strung' and prone to

tantrums; additionally, he almost certainly had doubts about Graham Brown's competence and hence their safety. He was probably severely shaken after what was an uncontrolled slither from the corner onto Graham Brown's back, which could have knocked both of them from the stance and precipitated them to their deaths. Despite his repeated denials, Smythe had considered the possibility of retreat.<sup>9</sup> It would have been lengthy and risky. But Smythe had extricated himself from difficulties on big mountains before. Only the previous year, he and Macphee had retreated from the Peutery ridge, in appalling weather, by descending from the Col de Peuterey via the Rochers Gruber. (Forty years later the incomparable Walter Bonatti would be stretched to his limit over the same ground – albeit after enduring a storm lasting several days on the Freney Pillar above.) For Smythe, given their predicament after failing to climb the corner and the uncertainties of what lay ahead, retreat may simply have seemed the correct mountaineering decision but Graham Brown's remarks also carried the implication that he had lost his nerve. That Smythe argued the case for retreat vehemently and, faced with Graham Brown's obstinacy, even 'hysterically', as Graham Brown alleged later, is credible.

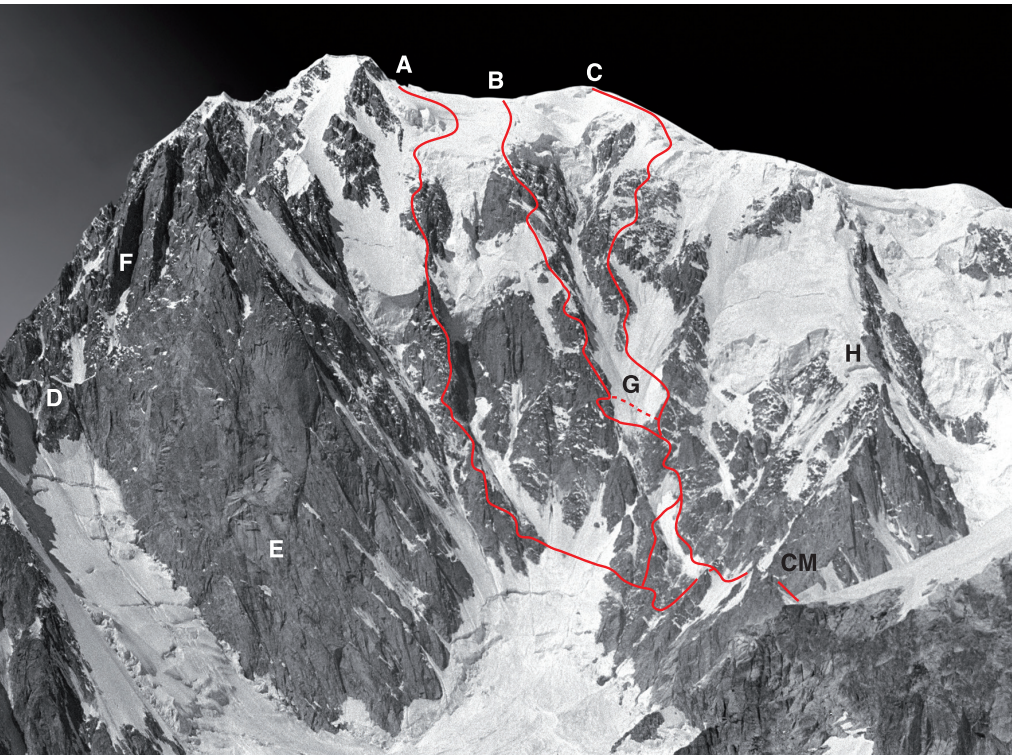
Smythe would never accept that Graham Brown had made a significant contribution to their success and years later would describe Graham Brown as 'virtually a passenger'<sup>11</sup> on the climb. But Graham Brown's two attempts to climb the corner were not the actions of a passive second and in dismissing his lead down and around the rock rib as 'some half-dozen steps'<sup>12</sup>, Smythe did Graham Brown an injustice. Graham Brown down-climbed, cutting steps for 50 – 60ft to the toe of the rib, then led around its base and up the far side. The ice was steep, the exposure great and the belay precarious. This passage was committing and decisive.

In September 1932 Graham Brown learned for the first time that Smythe



T Graham Brown at the cornice on the Red Sentinel route, Mont Blanc, 1927. (Frank Smythe)





The Brenva Face of Mont Blanc showing Brown/Smythe routes: **A.** Pear Route (1933), **B.** Route Major (1928), **C.** Red Sentinel (1927), **D.** Col de Peuterey, **E.** Eckpfeiler Buttress, **F.** Freney Pillars, **G.** Great Couloir, **H.** Old Brenva Ridge, **CM.** Col Moore. (John Cleare / Mountain Camera Picture Library)

had recounted a story about Graham Brown having fallen on the Route Major and that he had saved his life. Graham Brown was flabbergasted and pressed his friend Col. E.L. Strutt, editor of the *Alpine Journal*, for detail:

'Yes I do remember S[mythe] saying you fell off and both of you fell 100ft. before the rope hitched. . . . S[mythe] told me such a lot of b.l.s that I was bored to death and paid little attention.'<sup>13</sup>

It seems Strutt kept the tale to himself and Smythe did not circulate it widely although within months of their ascent of the Route Major, he had written to Geoffrey Winthrop Young describing his version of what had occurred on the ridge leading to the summit of Mont Blanc de Courmayeur:

' . . . when 10[ft.] up he came off, fell past me and flew off down the hard ice slope . . . I had no belay at all, and it was only a miracle that saved us. I managed to take in the rope as he slid down the rocks and somehow got it round a knob as big as my thumb. The fall was so bad that a wisp of rope was left on the knob but the rope (a Beale) held. For this I got not a word of thanks in apology though I flatter myself that it was the quickest bit of work I've ever done in my life . . .'<sup>14</sup>

Graham Brown flatly denied the story and it seems incredible that such a dramatic incident would have escaped reference in either man's accounts.

Did Smythe embellish events to discredit Graham Brown for his own advantage? Graham Brown certainly thought so. The gloves were now off and he chose his moment to retaliate.

On Christmas Eve 1932, he wrote to Smythe, with a distinct lack of seasonal cheer:

'You cannot have forgotten the scene you made at the ice-run on our 1928 Brenva ascent, and how you screamed as I lowered you down on the rope. You cannot have forgotten how you screamed in the corner when we tried to climb on that route, and then fell on me in crampons; nor how you behaved after that, and wished to give up the climb. You cannot have forgotten many other similar incidents.'<sup>15</sup>

Smythe replied:

' . . . Your letter contains statements about me which are untrue and which are merely intended to wound. It takes two to make a quarrel, but I am perfectly prepared to admit that my original letter began it.'<sup>16</sup>

And then continued by revisiting the details of the climb, inaccurately attributing the leading of the pitch down and around the rock rib to himself. But recognising that he and Graham Brown were going to serve together on the committee of the Alpine Club, offered an olive branch, saying that he was prepared to meet Graham Brown 'on the friendliest possible footing.'

Graham Brown was implacable. He made insulting and derogatory remarks about Smythe in his journals and notebooks, which may have been for his eyes only, and in private letters. Publicly, he dismissed the achievements of Smythe and his expedition on Kamet as 'a mere record'<sup>17</sup> and when Smythe's selection for the proposed expedition to Everest in 1933 became known, Graham Brown set out to discredit him. Over lunch at the Athenaeum, he told Hugh Rutledge, the appointed leader, that:

' . . . I regarded Smythe as a fraud. . . I said he funk'd . . . I said he would probably have no 'guts' at high elevation. . . I told him that Smythe told lies . . .'<sup>18</sup>

and noted self-righteously:

'I must say that the fact that the leader of the Everest expedition has been properly warned of the possible danger which Smythe may be to the expedition is a great relief to me. I have always been afraid for my own conscience should there be a disaster; and now feel acquitted of any personal responsibility'<sup>19</sup>

In the early drafts of his book *Brenva*, eventually published in 1944, Graham Brown subjected Smythe's accounts of their climbs to forensic examination. The interventions of friends, his publisher and eventually Smythe's solicitor resulted in excisions and a moderation of tone but still Smythe felt slighted and maintained in letters that he had led 90% of the Route Major and that Graham Brown had been a passenger. At the end of 1948 Smythe sent a Christmas card to Graham Brown; just over six months later Smythe was dead.

Smythe, temperamental and quick to take offence, had, in an attempt to protect his reputation, unwisely ignited the feud. Each time he tried to

justify himself, his version of events became more contradictory and exacerbated matters. But over the years, Smythe made numerous apologies for his part in their feud and repeatedly asked to restore friendly relations. Graham Brown was unwavering. What was at the root of his implacability? He was naturally combative; his obituarist, Lord Adrian, described him as 'a formidable opponent' who 'did not always conceal his pleasure in the fight and the victory'<sup>20</sup>. Graham Brown had a highly developed sense of self-esteem. He caused difficulties for Bill Tilman and James Waller over their respective accounts of the expeditions to Nanda Devi and Masherbrum because he felt his contribution had not received sufficient recognition. Although capable of friendship he did not hesitate to sever relations if he considered himself wronged and forgiveness did not come easily to him but eventually he relented, except in the case of Smythe, who, in his view, had feet of clay. As he observed Smythe's ascent to celebrity, he could not forget that Smythe had wanted to retreat from high up on the Route Major and that their success on the climb, which was the spring-board for Smythe's later achievements and fame, was due to him.

**Acknowledgements:** The authors would like to thank the Alpine Club and National Library of Scotland for permission to reproduce quotations from material in their possession.

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DENNIS GRAY

## The Pocket Hercules

A Portrait of Leo Amery



Leo Amery. (Alpine Club Photo Library)

*'Swift as the wind my pursuer overtook me, seized me in a ferocious grip and hurled me into the deepest part of the pool. My fellow form members then advised me, 'It's Amery. He is head of his house; he is champion at gym, he has got his football colours'. 'A being of enormous strength.'*

Winston Churchill. *My Early Life* (p 18).

This incident occurred at Harrow School where Churchill and Leo Amery were contemporaries in the 1890s. Winston had had the temerity to push the unsuspecting Leo into the swimming pool and Amery