

# THE EARLY ATTEMPTS ON MONT BLANC DE COURMAYEUR FROM THE INNOMINATA BASIN

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## I. INTRODUCTION

**T**HE twin summits of Mont Blanc and Mont Blanc de Courmayeur rise but little above their connecting ridge, and the whole forms a mountain mass, three sides of which rise above the Italian valleys and the fourth above France. So far as direct ascent from Italy is concerned, one or other of the twins may be reached from any one of three glacier basins—that of the Brenva Glacier on the N.E., that of the parallel Fresnay and Brouillard Glaciers, which may be called the Innominata basin, on the S.E., and that of the Miage Glacier and its tributaries on the S.W. The Brenva, Innominata, and Miage faces of the main mass rise respectively above these three basins, the Innominata face being sharply separated from the others by the well-defined Brouillard (S.) and Péteret (S.E.) arêtes of Mont Blanc de Courmayeur. These arêtes, having fallen to Col Emile Rey and the Col de Péteret respectively, rise to be continued as short chains of subsidiary peaks—the lower Brouillard ridge on the one hand and the lower Péteret ridge on the other. The Innominata basin is separated from the outer parts of the Miage and Brenva basins by these subsidiary ridges, which merit the name ‘lower’ only in contrast to the great mass of Mont Blanc de Courmayeur.<sup>1</sup>

The mountaineers who first endeavoured to reach the great twins by an Italian route from the south had thus the choice of three glacier basins from which to commence their attempts, and the climbing histories of the three basins show a significant contrast between those of the Miage and Brenva Glaciers on the one hand and that of the Innominata basin on the other.

In the case of the Miage basin, the first party to ascend the Miage Glacier with the intention of reaching Mont Blanc did so without preliminary trial or rebuff when Yeats Brown won the summit with Julien Grange in 1868<sup>2</sup> by the indirect route over the Dôme du Goûter

<sup>1</sup> For convenience, the terms ‘Brouillard *arête*’ and ‘Péteret *arête*’ are here confined to the actual terminal arêtes of Mont Blanc de Courmayeur above Col Emile Rey and the Col de Péteret respectively. The terms ‘Brouillard *ridge*’ and ‘Péteret *ridge*’ are used to denote the subsidiary chains which prolong the arêtes and respectively bear Mont Brouillard and the Aiguille Blanche de Péteret, but an *ascent* of the ‘Péteret ridge’ is to be taken as including the Péteret arête.

<sup>2</sup> *A. J.*, 4. 261.

which had been used in the descent by Buxton, Grove, and Macdonald three years before.<sup>3</sup> The direct route up the actual Miage face of Mont Blanc was similarly accomplished at the first attempt by T. S. Kennedy with Johann Fischer and Carrel in 1872 from a bivouac some distance below the site of the present Sella hut, and by one of the least deviating of all the routes to the summit of Mont Blanc.<sup>4</sup>

The basin of the Brenva Glacier has a similar history of immediate success. It is true that a visit was paid to the Brenva Glacier in 1863 or 1864 by John Birkbeck, junior, who was then attempting climbing routes far in advance of the standard of his time and in any case was not the man to explore a glacier basin without serious intentions. This visit, however, has not hitherto been recorded, and we have now no information concerning either its object or its outcome. So far as published records exist, the first serious attempt to reach Mont Blanc from the Brenva Glacier was that in which A. W. Moore's party at once succeeded when it made the famous first ascent of the old Brenva route in 1865.<sup>5</sup> That route, although a direct one in the sense here adopted, does not in fact lead up the actual Brenva face of Mont Blanc, but only borders it, and so long as sixty-two years had to pass before the ascent of the face itself succeeded at the first attempt.<sup>6</sup>

The climbing history of the Innominata basin is in marked contrast with those of its neighbours, and the difference is due to the formation of the basin. From Mont Blanc de Courmayeur, the Péteret arête descends steeply almost due E. to the Eckpfeiler, at which it changes direction to fall S.E. to the Col de Péteret (3,948 m.). This line is then continued as the Péteret ridge over the Aiguille Blanche and the Aiguille Noire de Péteret to Mont Noir de Péteret, from the last of which the great ridge plunges abruptly to the floor of Val Veni. In the other direction, the Brouillard arête descends S.S.W. over Pic Luigi Amadeo (4472 m.) to Col Emile Rey (4012 m.) in a slight curve convex to the W. Gradually changing direction first to due S. and finally to S.S.E. over Mont Brouillard and the Aiguilles Rouges, the Brouillard ridge continues the curve of the higher arête until it plunges to the floor of the valley at a point almost due S. of the summit of Mont Blanc de Courmayeur. The E. side of this great curve and the S.W. side of the Péteret ridge are continuously precipitous rock faces, and they enclose between them the Innominata basin. The head of this basin is barred by the great wall of steep rock which forms the terminal mass of Mont Blanc de Courmayeur between the Péteret and Brouillard arêtes of the mountain on either hand. This, the Innominata face, is directed S.E.

A straight line from the Col de Péteret to Col Emile Rey would nearly touch the rock of the Innominata face along its breadth but some considerable distance above the levels of the glaciers below it. At about mid-length, this line would however pass through a third high col which is of the same general elevation as the others. This is

<sup>3</sup> *A. J.* 2. 133, 332.

<sup>5</sup> *A. J.* 2. 132, 369.

<sup>4</sup> *A. J.* 6. 90, 168.

<sup>6</sup> *A. J.* 39. 308 ; 40. 68.

Col Eccles (*ca.* 4000 m.), which is a narrow snow neck connecting a buttress, Pic Eccles (*ca.* 4050 m.), to the foot of the Innominata face near the termination of one of its shallow ribs. From Pic Eccles, an arête descends S.E. to the low Col du Fresnay, and the ridge is continued in the same direction over Punta Innominata to Aiguille Joseph Croux. A branch rib which descends S. from a point between these two summits curves round to the S.E., merges in the alp on which now stands the Gamba hut (this may be called the Gamba alp), and finally becomes again defined as the Aiguille du Châtelet, whence the ridge, like its incomparably greater neighbours, also plunges abruptly to the floor of the main valley.

This comparatively low intermediate ridge divides the Innominata basin into two parallel halves in the direction of its length. The westerly half is filled by the Brouillard Glacier, which falls, almost without major break but continuously riven, from Col Emile Rey and the W. flank of Col Eccles. The easterly half of the basin is filled by the Fresnay Glacier which takes origin in the E. flank of Col Eccles and the Col de Péteret. This latter glacier commences as a high névé shelf which discharges as a vertical icefall of great height between the rocky flank of Pic Eccles and a steep mass of rock which may be described as part of the Aiguille Blanche de Péteret, from the main mass of which it is separated by a narrow rock and ice couloir. The snouts of the Fresnay and Brouillard Glaciers lie in rocky troughs far above the level of Val Veni, and below each of them is a steep glacis of rock only slightly set back from the plane of the terminal cliffs of the Péteret and Brouillard ridges.

The Innominata basin is thus a hanging valley, access to the foot of which is by no means simple and exit from which by any other than the way from the valley is certainly difficult.<sup>7</sup> So far as the ascent of Mont Blanc itself is concerned, the summit of Mont Blanc de Courmayeur might obviously be attained by way of the Brouillard arête after Col Emile Rey had first been reached, by way of the Col de Péteret and the Péteret arête, or by a direct ascent of the Innominata face from the point at which Col Eccles impinges against it. These three possibilities constitute the Brouillard, Péteret, and Innominata routes from the Gamba alp, and each of these three routes possesses its own peculiar problems and its own individual difficulties. This, however, they possess in common, that each of them promises rock climbing of a standard which must have appeared to the early generation of mountaineers to make ascent almost, if not absolutely, impracticable. Further, each of these routes (save where the Col de Péteret and Col Emile Rey might be reached over summits of the lower ridges, or the latter might be reached from the Miage side) must commence with the same long and difficult ascent of the Brouillard

<sup>7</sup> This statement is a little too sweeping because the low Col des Chasseurs at the level more or less of the Gamba alp offers an easy exit into the Fauteuil des Allemands—a small hanging valley in the S.E. face of the Aig. Noire de Péteret.

Glacier as far, at least, as the Col du Fresnay. This is so because the Fresnay Glacier itself offers only an extremely difficult access to the Col de Péteret, which is to be attained with less difficulty from the glacier's upper shelf, reached over Pic Eccles.

These formations easily explain the protracted history of the Innominata basin as a way to Mont Blanc and also the many and gallant failures to reach the great summit which dominates the basin. That history differs strikingly from those of the Brenva and Miage basins. Thirteen years elapsed, and seven unsuccessful attempts to reach Mont Blanc were made, between 1864, when the first climbing party to do so entered the basin; and 1877, when Eccles' party was the first to leave it save by retreat to the valley. In the forty-two years which next elapsed before the Innominata route was achieved by Courtauld and Oliver in 1919, Mont Blanc was attained from the Gamba alp by only one more party, although two additional parties left the basin by other than their way of entry. Fourteen years then passed before any party reached Mont Blanc from the Gamba alp by way of the Brouillard arête—sixty-nine years in all after the initial attempt on that route by Birkbeck in 1864. Prior to the erection of the Gamba hut in 1912, there had been about thirty visits of climbing parties to the Innominata basin, the visits of search parties and of chamois hunters being here excluded. After the erection of the Gamba hut, when H. O. Jones (who had entered the basin on previous occasions) and G. W. Young were the first to use it, the visits of climbing parties became much more frequent. Many of these parties, both before and after the erection of the hut, had as their objectives merely the ascent of the lower points of the Innominata ridge and the astounding views which these afford, but it is remarkable that before 1927, when the Péteret route over the Aiguille Blanche attained from the Gamba alp was first accomplished, no more than five parties in all had reached Mont Blanc from the Innominata basin, and only seven parties in all had quitted the basin over the higher summits—in sixty-three years of endeavour.

Such a history points vividly to the formidable nature of the great climbing routes to Mont Blanc from the Gamba alp, and it is with a catch of the breath that one realises that men were to be found in the early days of climbing who could face these problems with stout hearts in spite of an immature technique and the hard bivouacs which of necessity had to take the place of the modern huts. The records of these pioneer attempts are unfortunately scanty, but it is fascinating to try to unravel them. Even the story of the more modern endeavours and successes has its own great fascination.

## 2. BIRKBECK'S ATTEMPT, 1864 (BROUILLARD ROUTE)

The Innominata basin was first penetrated by any climbing party when John Birkbeck, junior, entered it in 1864 with the intention of finding a route to Mont Blanc.

From the Gamba alp (between the snouts of the two glaciers), which must first be reached by all parties, the lie of the Brouillard Glacier on the left is fairly obvious, but that of the deeper-lying Fresnay Glacier on the right is more hidden. The former glacier must therefore have appeared to present the better line of advance (as it does in fact) to a pioneer party, and did the direct ascent of the Innominata face look to be impracticable on closer inspection from the upper part of the glacier, the way round by Col Emile Rey and the Brouillard arête would certainly appear to offer a less deterrent possibility than that by the Col de Péteret and the Péteret arête.

What we know of Birkbeck's line of advance is in accordance with the topography. He possibly gained the surface of the Brouillard Glacier over a little gap in the lower part of the S. arête of Punta Innominata which sweeps from right to left across the forward view from the Gamba alp. He certainly ascended the glacier to near the Col du Fresnay, thence struck left (N.W.) to the foot of the couloir which descends from Col Emile Rey, and ascended to a point about half way up the couloir, stonefall at that place forcing a retreat. The only published authority for Birkbeck's attempt is Eccles,<sup>8</sup> who states that, after his own attempt in 1875, on the same route by the same line, he had learnt that Birkbeck had thus preceded him and had been frustrated by the same cause. Stonefall from the rocks of the Brouillard arête above Col Emile Rey has turned back more than these two parties, and Lauper's vivid description of such an event shows how great may be that danger at that place.<sup>9</sup>

Eccles' brief reference gives no indication of the highest point actually reached by Birkbeck, but we may find such indication in a hitherto unrecorded contemporary source, which also helps us to date the attempt more exactly. On July 2, 1864, Adams-Reilly made the first ascent of the Aiguille d'Estellette in order to examine the Aiguille de Trélatête for his proposed attempt on that mountain. He then descended, walked for 2 hours up the Glacier de Miage, returned, and reached Courmayeur in the evening, there to encounter Captain Mieulet. On the following day, July 3, he left Courmayeur in the afternoon for Mont Fréty, from which he crossed the Col du Géant on July 4 to Chamonix, where he met Moore and Whymper fresh from their campaign in Dauphiné. But before leaving Courmayeur on July 3, Reilly met Birkbeck and made the following entry in his Journal: 'Saw Birkbeck at Hotel Mont Blanc. He had mounted to the top of Glacier Fressenay [*sic*], and had got  $\frac{1}{2}$  way up a couloir.'<sup>10</sup>

All probability (quite apart from Eccles' definite statement) points to the Brouillard Glacier and not to the Fresnay Glacier as that of Birkbeck's attempt, and Reilly must have been mistaken when he thought that it was the latter.<sup>11</sup> The couloir in question can have

<sup>8</sup> *A. J.* 8. 410.

<sup>9</sup> *A. J.* 38. 341, see also Finch: *A. J.* 34. 124-5.

<sup>10</sup> Adams-Reilly: *MS. Journals* (in the possession of the Alpine Club).

<sup>11</sup> Adams-Reilly need not necessarily have misunderstood Birkbeck (as was in any case possible at a brief meeting and in the nebulous state of current knowledge of these glaciers). He was more probably influenced by a topo-

been none other than that of Col Emile Rey, and the point indicated is just where exposure to stonefall may occur. Reilly's entry strongly suggests that Birkbeck's attempt was made on July 1 and 2, 1864, and it must, of course, have been made before July 3.

There is, unfortunately, no information with regard to the other members of Birkbeck's party. This problem, however, raises a curious point. Birkbeck wrote undated certificates in the Guide's Books of Laurent Lanier and Laurent Proment, who were at this time two of the best guides in Courmayeur.<sup>12</sup> These two certificates are nearly identical, and that given to Proment runs: 'Laurent Proment accompanied me as guide on the Brenva Glacier. I have found him good in all respects.' Internal evidence shows that these entries must have been written between September 1, 1863, and July 25, 1864, and other evidence makes it nearly certain that they were written in the latter year. It may be regarded as very improbable that Birkbeck would have failed to mention it in the certificates, had these two guides been with him on so serious an attempt as that by the Brouillard route, and the probability is that other guides accompanied him on that occasion.<sup>13</sup>

The Brenva expedition is of considerable interest. As is apparent from Birkbeck's other climbs in 1864, he was then attempting routes of exceptional standard for the time, and with such guides as Lanier and Proment, his intention when he visited the Brenva Glacier must have been serious. There is, however, no other mention of this expedition, which may of course have been frustrated by bad weather. It must have occurred either shortly before the Brouillard attempt or on July 4 and 5, and there is some evidence which suggests the latter date. As we have seen, Adams-Reilly crossed the Col du Géant to Chamonix on July 3. Birkbeck followed him on July 6, traversing the pass from Mont Fréty to Montenvers in the short time of 5 hours. The fact that Birkbeck did not cross with his friend Reilly on the earlier date suggests that he remained in Courmayeur for some serious project, and if that were a visit to the Brenva Glacier its object, whether frustrated or not, may scarcely have been anything but an attempt upon a Brenva route to Mont Blanc.

graphical mistake. He maps the 'Gl. de Fressenay' as arising in the true upper basin of the Brouillard Glacier and as flowing through what is obviously the Col du Fresnay into its real basin, whilst he places his 'Gl. de Broglia' in the lower part of its correct basin, and apparently assumes that it has a common origin with the Fresnay Glacier. In the light of this mistaken topography, Birkbeck would therefore be described as reaching the couloir of Col Emile Rey from 'the top of Glacier Fressenay.'

<sup>12</sup> Lanier's Guide's Book is in the possession of the Club, that of Proment is in the Alpine museum at Courmayeur.

<sup>13</sup> Durazzo's movements in 1870 and 1872, and his apparent belief that his entry into the Innominata basin in the latter year was a first occasion, strongly suggest that there was no knowledge in Courmayeur of Birkbeck's previous exploration, and other evidence points to the same conclusion. I suspect that Birkbeck had a Chamonix guide whom he perhaps handed over to Adams-Reilly for the latter's passage of the Col du Géant, thereafter engaging Courmayeur men for the Brenva expedition. If so, the guide cannot have been Michel Croz, with whom Birkbeck however climbed later on in that year.

Birkbeck's other expeditions in 1864 have been alluded to above and a word may be devoted to them. He was probably joined by Michel Croz as guide shortly after July 20, and he made at least one attempt on the unclimbed Aiguille Verte before July 29. On July 30 and 31 he made another attempt on the Aiguille Verte with Michel Croz, this time (if not also before) by the Argentière face which was not to be achieved until 1876. The attempt was finally stopped by the danger of stonefall, but not before 11 hours had been spent on the mountain—a sufficient indication that the attempt was well pressed home.<sup>14</sup> Notwithstanding the fatigue of such an expedition, Birkbeck reached the summit of Mont Blanc with Adams-Reilly by the ordinary Corridor route two days later, and the pair of them next solved the old problem of the route to Mont Blanc from the Col de Miage on August 5, but without including the actual summit in their expedition.<sup>15</sup> The long day's work commenced at the Chalets de Miage, the Dôme du Goûter was reached from the col and it was traversed, the party finally reaching Chamonix that same night. In 1861 it had been Birkbeck's fall of 1800 ft. from the Col de Miage which put an end to the similar attempt of a large but strong party which included Hudson, Leslie Stephen, and Tuckett,<sup>16</sup> and it is remarkable that Birkbeck was finally to succeed on that same route, but perhaps almost as remarkable that he was ever to climb again.

In 1882 Birkbeck delivered a lecture on some of his mountain experiences, and the manuscript is extant.<sup>17</sup> He describes amongst others several of his ascents of Mont Blanc including those with Adams-Reilly by the Corridor and by the St. Gervais route over the Aiguille du Goûter, and their traverse of the Dôme du Goûter from the Col de Miage. Birkbeck also describes an ascent of Monte Rosa in his father's footsteps, his attempt on the Zermatt ridge of the Matterhorn only a year after the accident to the first party (Birkbeck's guides were nervous from the commencement and finally refused to go further after they had reached the shoulder), and his later successful traverse of the same mountain from Breuil, when he returned over the Breuiljoch that same day and regained Breuil 19 hours after setting out. Save in the case of one nearly successful attempt on Mont Blanc by the Corridor route, Birkbeck makes no mention at all of his failures, and there is no allusion to the attempt on the Brouillard route, nor to his visit to the Brenva Glacier, nor to many other expeditions of which we would like to know more, such as the attempts on the Argentière face of the Aiguille Verte and a later attempt on the Aiguille du Petit Dru.

The magnitude of Birkbeck's attempt from the Innominata basin, and its magnitude even as a project, become almost overwhelming when we take into consideration the circumstances of the time, as well as the rudimentary technique of the day (Moore's party on the old Brenva

<sup>14</sup> See *A. J.* 44. 331 (Adams-Reilly's Journal quoted).

<sup>15</sup> *A. J.*, I. 375; 2. 97.

<sup>16</sup> *P.P.G.*, II, vol. I. 208.

<sup>17</sup> In the possession of the Club.

route in 1865 were still using alpenstocks, except that the guides had ice-axes). Up to the date on which Birkbeck reached the Gamba alp, the independent peaks of the chain of Mont Blanc had remained almost unclimbed. Save for Mont Blanc itself and the subsidiary peaks reached or traversed during its classical ascents (Mont Blanc du Tacul, Dôme and Aiguille du Goûter) the only summits in the range which had yet been attained were the Aiguille du Midi (by guides in 1856) and the Dôme de Miage (by E. T. Coleman in 1858). Birkbeck must have known of the possibilities of the virgin peaks, if only from his friend Adams-Reilly, and all of them must have been within his capacity. It says much for the great heart of the man that he turned rather to such climbs as the Brouillard route and the Argentière face of the Aiguille Verte, and the very fact that he even entertained such projects may well be a matter for amazement. When Birkbeck failed he failed grandly, and he chose his failures well.

### 3. DURAZZO'S ATTEMPT, 1870 (BROUILLARD ROUTE)

The first of the Marchese Agostino Durazzo's two attempts was made in August 1870, his sole guide being Julien Grange, one of the most interesting personalities amongst the guides of that day. Durazzo's vague reference to this expedition is our only source of information, and it must be read in the light of previous history.

The early Courmayeur guides were little more than muleteers who conducted their patrons round the low passes on the 'Tour of Mont Blanc,' during which they would spend one of their nights at Chamonix. The rich harvest reaped by the guides of that place from the comparatively easy Chamonix route to Mont Blanc must have impressed the Courmayeur men, who no doubt longed to possess such a route from their own valley. In any case it would appear that the Courmayeur guides began to search for a way of their own to Mont Blanc in or before 1854, in which year they may have visited the Brenva Glacier with that intention and almost certainly did explore for a possible route from the Col du Midi.<sup>18</sup> It must also have been about that time (that is, a few years before 1858) that a party of Courmayeur guides attempted to find a route from the Miage Glacier 'but were brought up by a vertical wall of rock.'<sup>19</sup> It is however certain that James Ramsay found the Courmayeur guides making preparations for an attempt on the route from the Col du Midi when he arrived in the village in 1855. Ramsay joined the party and virtually succeeded in reaching Mont Blanc.<sup>20</sup>

This Col du Midi route, although it really belongs to the French side of the watershed, gave promise of making a Courmayeur way to

<sup>18</sup> A more serious claim for these explorations was later made by an old guide to the Abbé Henry (*Les Premiers Guides de Courmayeur*, 1908, p. 9), but in this connexion see *A. J.*, 47. 332.

<sup>19</sup> E. T. Coleman, *Scenes from the Snow Fields*, 1859, p. 19.

<sup>20</sup> *A. J.* 1. 136; 8. App., 14; 28. 261.

Mont Blanc, and the guides, under the inspiration of Julien Grange, built a hut on the Col du Midi in 1863 to facilitate the ascent. On August 13 of the same year, R. W. Head for the first time reached the actual summit of Mont Blanc by that route,<sup>21</sup> being accompanied by Julien Grange and two porters—an unusually small party for that time. Perhaps it was because of the smallness of the party that the summit was reached so early in the day as 10 A.M.,<sup>22</sup> but, in spite of the hut, the route became notorious for the number of parties which failed to reach the summit, and it was clear that a popular route from Courmayeur had still to be found.

Felice Giordano, an engineer of Courmayeur, made the second complete ascent by this route in 1864 with Julien Grange, Séraphin Henry and Perrod as guides and two additional porters, reaching the summit at 2 P.M. and descending to Chamonix.<sup>23</sup> He realised that such a route could never be popular, and when on the Col du Géant during his return home, he discussed the problem with his guides and promised them a prize of 200 francs if they should discover a route from the Glacier de Miage—which seemed to offer the most likely chance of success.<sup>24</sup> This problem made a very strong appeal to Julien Grange who had perhaps already explored the Brenva Glacier (he must have done so before 1865 in any case), and now turned to the Miage basin. He made at least three explorations in that region, ascending Mont Suc and examining the great flanks of Mont Blanc through his telescope.<sup>25</sup>

Such a route was in fact discovered by mistake in 1865 when Buxton, Grove, and Macdonald attempted to repeat the traverse of the Dôme du Goûter by the route of Adams-Reilly and Birkbeck, but in the opposite direction.<sup>26</sup> Missing their way, they descended by the Glacier du Dôme to the Miage Glacier, and so made a novel route in the descent. Earlier in the same year, Moore's success on the old Brenva route had nevertheless shown that that way could provide no rival in popularity to the ascent of Mont Blanc from Chamonix, and there remained only the way by the Miage Glacier to be proved by an actual ascent.

Durazzo appears first to have climbed with Julien Grange in 1868, when they ascended the Rutor, and in that year he recommended him to Yeats Brown, who was about to visit Courmayeur. Yeats Brown discovered Grange's ambitions, told him about the descent of 1865, and decided to try the new route. They succeeded in their object on July 25, but it is to be noted that Julien Grange wished to make straight running for Mont Blanc itself, that for this purpose they went up to the E. head of the Glacier du Dôme, and that their intention to ascend thence directly to the ridge of the Bosses was only abandoned because of the danger of falling ice.<sup>27</sup> This line of approach yielded

<sup>21</sup> *A. J.* 1. 201.

<sup>22</sup> Head's certificate to Grange, in the Abbé Henry's possession.

<sup>23</sup> *The Times*, August, 1864.

<sup>24</sup> Henry, *Premiers Guides*, etc., p. 18.

<sup>25</sup> *Augusta Praetoria*, 5. 179.

<sup>26</sup> *A. J.* 2. 133, 332.

<sup>27</sup> *A. J.* 4. 261.

a difficult alternative ascent to the Dôme du Goûter, and it was perhaps for that reason that the Dôme route for long failed to achieve its present popularity. Julien Grange himself remained unsatisfied and still held the hope that a more direct route might be found.

Durazzo then entered the story. He was moved by the idea that a successful route to Mont Blanc from Courmayeur must be one capable of being descended again in the same day, and he thought that only a route up rocks would offer a safe way of descent in the afternoon. He accordingly made his first attempt to find such a route in August 1870 with Julien Grange, whose interest was still centred in the Miage Glacier. Durazzo's account of the attempt is brief and vague: their objective was the Brouillard ridge, they spent a long and fruitless day on their attempt, and T. S. Kennedy ultimately profited by their mistake.<sup>28</sup> This last incorrect belief, with what we know of Grange's ambitions and Durazzo's description of their entry into the Innominata basin in 1872 as if it were a first visit, all suggest very strongly that the present attempt must have taken the form of an attack upon the lower Brouillard ridge from the Miage side and not from the Innominata basin. It has been assumed that they attained the S. point of the Aiguilles Rouges du Brouillard (the lowest point on the Brouillard ridge) from the region of the Jardin de Miage.<sup>29</sup> This would fit what seems to be a necessary requirement that the point which they attained gave no good view across the upper Innominata basin.

Julien Grange's name is so closely connected with the history of the southern routes to Mont Blanc that space may be given here to the man and his record, now almost forgotten.

With regard to the man himself, we have Yeats Brown's brief but vivid description<sup>30</sup>: 'a rough, tough, ugly, stumpy, red-haired, good-humoured, hot-tempered, broad-shouldered pocket-Hercules of a fellow, who hung his head and blushed, and put his thumbs in his waistcoat-armholes when you spoke to him.' With regard to his record, it must be noted that Grange suffered from a double disadvantage. In the first place, he was born at Verrand (a few miles down the valley from Courmayeur), and the Courmayeur guides were jealous of a 'foreigner' in their ranks, a state of affairs which Grange's temper, outspokenness, and a certain degree of boastfulness did little to improve. In the second place, the Courmayeur guides as a whole were at that time given a by no means high reputation by the great guides of Chamonix and the Oberland, whose estimates carried weight with the great mountaineers of the day. Save in rare instances, the Courmayeur men had little opportunity of climbing in good company, and were often engaged merely as porters to the bivouac, as was Grange himself for Moore's first ascent of the old Brenva route and Kennedy's first

<sup>28</sup> *Boll. C.A.I.* 6. 291.

<sup>29</sup> See, for instance, Louis Kurz: *Guide de la Chaîne du Mont Blanc*, 2nd edition, 1914, p. 238. It may be regarded as certain that Séraphin Henry was not a member of the party. Durazzo does not mention him, and there is no corresponding certificate in the Guide's Book of Henry (now in Courmayeur).

<sup>30</sup> *A.ŷ.* 4. 262.

ascent of Mont Blanc by the Miage face. Melchior Anderegg had no grounds whatsoever for the suggestion at the Brenva bivouac that Grange (of all people) was relieved when his earnest request to be allowed to go on with the party had to be refused, but the incident indicates the attitude of the great Oberlanders to the Courmayeur guides.

Notwithstanding these disadvantages, Grange led or took part in many great expeditions between 1857 (his first crossing of the Col du Géant) and 1889 (an ascent of the Matterhorn, his last known expedition). The most remarkable may be briefly summarised: in 1863, he led the first complete ascent of Mont Blanc from the Col du Midi, as he also led the second in 1864; in 1865, he led the Courmayeur guides at the second ascent of the Grandes Jorasses to learn the way a few days after Whymper's first ascent; in 1868, he took part in the first ascent of the higher summit of the Grandes Jorasses, and he led the first ascent of the Dôme route to Mont Blanc; in 1869, he made an attempt on the Dent du Géant with Liottardi; in 1870, he led the first ascent of the Aiguilles Rouges du Brouillard; in 1872, he took part in the first ascent of the Aiguille de Leschaux, and he led the first ascent of Punta Innominata; in 1873, he made the first descent of Kennedy's route on the Miage face of Mont Blanc; in 1882, he took part in the attempt on the Aiguille Blanche de Péteret with Signor Gamba.

In addition to these, Grange made many first-class ascents, chiefly with Italian climbers, in the Oberland, in the Graians, at Zermatt, and in the chain of Mont Blanc, also making repeated ascents of that mountain itself by the Miage face, by the Col du Midi route, and from Chamonix. Above all, however, he was an explorer, as his early visits to the Brenva and Miage basins show. The southern flanks of Mont Blanc were his great ambition, and in 1876 or 1877 he dictated a curious narrative concerning his connexion with them.<sup>31</sup>

#### 4. KENNEDY'S PROJECT, 1872 (BROUILLARD ARÊTE)

Durazzo was mistaken in thinking that his own failure in 1870 made any essential contribution to the success of T. S. Kennedy in 1872, although the fact that Kennedy took Julien Grange as far as the bivouac may have suggested the surmise. Kennedy's expedition, whilst it had as little direct connexion with the Innominata basin as had Durazzo's in 1870, yet bears on this history in a twofold manner.

Kennedy had, in fact, already decided to attempt a direct route to Mont Blanc from the Miage side before he reached Courmayeur in 1872. An intended examination from the Aiguille de Trélatête had to be abandoned on account of bad weather, and it was replaced on his way to Courmayeur by an expedition up the Miage Glacier and an ascent past the Aiguilles Grises, from which point Kennedy made a close examination of the Miage face with Johann Fischer.

The line of attack was decided at this examination. A bivouac was

<sup>31</sup> *Augusta Praetoria*, 5. 176.

to be made on the rocks below the site of the present Quintino Sella hut. An ascent of the further rocks would lead to the basin of the Glacier du Mont-Blanc. This was to be crossed to the foot of the rocks of Pic Luigi Amadeo, and these were to be ascended on the near (N.) side of the couloir which falls from Col Emile Rey on its W. flank. The Brouillard arête was thus to be attained a little above its steep fall to the col, and below Pic Luigi Amadeo, and the ascent would then be continued up the Brouillard arête to Mont Blanc de Courmayeur, from which Mont Blanc would be reached.

This decided, they returned to Courmayeur where they were joined by J. A. Carrel. Kennedy engaged Julien Grange as porter for the bivouac, which they reached on July 1. Kennedy set out early next morning with Fischer and Carrel (Grange descended to Courmayeur), and so reached the Glacier du Mont-Blanc. It there, however, became obvious that a more direct route could be made almost straight up to the summit of Mont Blanc, and Kennedy, like a good mountaineer, therefore abandoned his more roundabout original project, and was at once successful on the 'Rochers' route.<sup>32</sup>

The original project, which was ultimately carried out by the brothers Gugliemina with Joseph Brocherel in 1901, is of interest to this present history as an early intention on the Brouillard route. The actual outcome of the expedition has a more direct effect on the story. Kennedy at once saw that his new route would provide a practicable way to Mont Blanc from Courmayeur, especially were a hut to be built near his bivouac place. This prophecy was fulfilled and the Rochers route to Mont Blanc solved the old problem of a popular way up from Courmayeur. In the year following Kennedy's achievement, the new route was ascended by at least as many as five parties, whilst several other parties were turned back from it by bad weather. A hut was completed in 1875, and Kennedy's fine route became the usual way up from Courmayeur until the Dôme route was rediscovered, when the former fell into undeserved neglect.

##### 5. DURAZZO'S SECOND ATTEMPT, 1872 (INNOMINATA ROUTE)

Agostino Durazzo returned to the attack with Julien Grange three weeks after Kennedy's success on the Miage face, Séraphin Henry now being added to the party as second guide—this indicating that a serious attempt was in view, and not a mere examination. In contrast with almost all other early attempts from the Innominata basin, we have in this case accurate information with regard to the aims of the party, the line adopted, and the point attained.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>32</sup> *A. J.* 6. 168.

<sup>33</sup> *Boll. C.A.I.* 6. 291. Durazzo's certificate to Séraphin Henry gives the date as July 22 (probably that of their departure from Courmayeur), and describes the expedition as one to the 'summit of the Brouillard Glacier.' Grange's later narrative (*Augusta Praetoria*, 5. 176) is brief, and he apparently confuses and combines the two expeditions of 1870 and 1872. He seems to be unaware of any previous visit to the Brouillard Glacier and writes of the point attained as the 'Aiguille Blanche du Brouillard.'

The objective was an ascent of the actual Innominata face from the basin, and it was proposed to reach the summit from the floor of the main valley in a single day without intermediate bivouac. With this end in view, the party left Courmayeur on July 22, and slept that night at the Cantine de la Visaille, from which place the attempt was to be made. Leaving the Cantine at 3.15 A.M. on the following morning, the party ascended moraine to reach the base of some rocks, then went up a couloir and some chimneys, a final couloir landing it on a grassy shoulder—near the Gamba alp. Continuing up the true left edge of the Brouillard Glacier for a little way, the party soon halted at the edge of the glacier to eat—probably some distance above the site of the present Gamba hut.

A curious point may be noticed here. Durazzo makes no mention of any previous visit by a climbing party, and he and the Courmayeur guides must have been unaware of Birkbeck's previous attempt by the Brouillard Glacier. In addition, the whole tone of Durazzo's description is that of the penetration of hitherto unknown country. Yet the Gamba alp must have been frequented by chamois hunters in these days, and it is not conceivable that the two guides, and Grange in particular, had never been in the basin before. Any previous exploration of the actual glaciers by Grange may however be excluded. He was a solitary explorer and would never have gone alone up the riven Brouillard and Fresnay Glaciers. Durazzo's exploration in 1870 from the region of the Jardin de Miage suggests familiarity with the various terminal moraines of the Miage Glacier, and the present party may well, therefore, have entered the Innominata basin by the way under the snout of the Brouillard Glacier, and not by the more usual entry on the E. side of the Aiguille du Châtelet. If so, then almost the whole of the route now taken, both below and above the Gamba alp, may really have been new to all members of the party.

The three of them roped up and at once took to the Brouillard Glacier, it therefore being evident that they thus circumvented the lower end of the S. arête of Punta Innominata, and did not cross it by the small gap which leads over from the minute Glacier du Châtelet<sup>34</sup> to the Brouillard Glacier. The latter at first ascends steeply, so obscuring the view in front, but they gained this view after they had 'surmounted a rise of the glacier and turned the foot of a rock rib.' This description accords accurately with a place on the E. edge of the glacier near the foot of one of the ill-defined rock ribs which descend the flank of Punta Innominata, and they next ascended snow slopes to the right on that flank, won its crest, and so reached a point where they found themselves separated 'by a profound gulf' from the Innominata face of Mont Blanc de Courmayeur.

The peak thus attained for the first time was undoubtedly the Punta

<sup>34</sup> The Glacier du Châtelet is little more than a small permanent field of névé which lies in the recess between the S. and S.E. arêtes of Punta Innominata and faces S.E. between the main glaciers but wholly disconnected from them.

Innominata, which was so christened by Durazzo on this occasion (note the atmosphere—the unnamed peak of an unknown valley), and from which the Innominata face and basin derive their names. The view of the further route appeared to them not to be unpromising—‘on passe partout,’ said Grange, rather optimistically—but avalanches were falling down the couloirs with which the upper face was seamed. Durazzo certainly underrated the difficulties still in front, but the avalanches (and also, without doubt, the hour of day, which however is not given) denied trial, and they returned in their tracks. The snow on the glacier was by this time deep and soft, and the snow bridges across the crevasses which they had used in the morning were now weakened, but they descended safely and reached Courmayeur at 8 P.M.

The actual line taken on this good expedition raises some interesting questions. Durazzo's first attempt in 1870 had been with the Brouillard arête in view, but now he seems quite definitely to have had the Innominata face as his aim from the commencement. By this time he must have known without details of the mere fact of Kennedy's recent success, but would naturally suppose that it had been by way of the Brouillard arête attained from the Miage side, and, spurred by this, he may well have hoped to make his own way by the hitherto untried Innominata face. Even so, no party which was familiar with the topography of the upper basin would have wasted its time in an attempt to traverse Punta Innominata on its way to the face, particularly if the intention were to make the whole ascent in the course of a single day. From the fact that the party did ascend Punta Innominata it would seem to follow that whatever point may have been reached on the lower Brouillard ridge in 1870, no view across the Col du Fresnay showing that gap and the steep N.W. arête of Punta Innominata could have been obtained. Any such view point must therefore have been low down on the Brouillard ridge.

Durazzo's failure to make any reference to the previous exploration by Birkbeck in 1864 has also a bearing on this question. Birkbeck (whether by good luck or because of previous examination) avoided the Punta Innominata and reached near to the Col du Fresnay above that peak by a direct ascent of the glacier—the quickest way. If the Courmayeur guides had had any knowledge of the details of Birkbeck's exploration, the present party could scarcely have failed to know them, and so would have avoided its own mistake. This lack of knowledge suggests that Birkbeck had no Courmayeur man with him in 1864, and therefore supports the inference already drawn that Proment and Lanier were not his guides in the Innominata basin, although they accompanied him in an exploration of the Brenva Glacier.

With the present expedition, Durazzo ended his connection with the problem, perhaps convinced that the Innominata basin held no route which could be ascended and descended in the day. Grange persevered.

*(To be continued.)*