

Thumb presents a rock face for its entire 3,000 feet. We were fortunate in finding an excellent climbing route on a sloping rock-shelf leading to a scramble up a buttress, interspersed with short pitches of difficult climbing. The rock, however, was rotten and crumbled readily in many places. We climbed to a shoulder at about 2,000 ft., directly overlooking the Sanctuary Pinnacle, when the character of the mountain changed to a sheer rock face with only one fault—a vertical ice-filled cleft. A high wind had sprung up and although it was delightful to bask on the sun-warmed rocks when out of the wind, it was not a suitable day for difficult rock climbing. We accordingly descended until we found a snow-filled gully, which provided a good glissadé and route off the mountain. There is no doubt that the uppermost part of the Thumb presents great difficulty to the climber. During the year most of us had flown over this group of mountains several times and had studied possible routes from the air as well as from the ground, and from all angles it appeared to be a very steep rock climb.

This was our last day of climbing and the next day we struck camp, lashed up the sledge and drove the dogs back to the base. The fortnight's climbing had been a great success, if enjoyment is the criterion of success, though we were very disappointed by our failure to achieve all that we had set out to climb. Inevitably, we wasted a lot of time in exploring the most feasible routes on each crag and mountain, so that a more concerted effort on fewer mountains would probably have given better results. As it was, we were lucky in having five mountaineers together in the same locality in the Antarctic, and able, simultaneously, to escape from the official tasks of our respective expeditions. Life on an Antarctic expedition does not lend itself to large scale mountaineering exploits, which can only be fitted in when man-power is not in demand.

BOURRIT'S ATTEMPT ON MONT BLANC BY THE AIGUILLE DU GOÛTER IN 1784, AND THE FIRST ASSENT OF THE DÔME DU GOÛTER BY HIS GUIDES

By T. GRAHAM BROWN

NARRATIVES or accounts of climbing achievements have played so important a part in the development of the sport that the origins of its literature are of interest. As far as the English language is concerned, probably the earliest story of the conquest of an Alpine peak is that given in a translation (1775) of a book written in French by Marc Théodore Bourrit, the Genevese miniature artist, journalist and

Precentor at the Cathedral, in which Bourrit gave an account of the first ascent of the Buet by the brothers de Luc in 1770.¹ In 1779, William Coxe gave a short account of the attempt on Mont Blanc made by the Chamonix guides in 1775, shortly before he himself visited the valley;² and this account was reprinted in the *Annual Register* in 1780.³ A third item in our early literature is the translation in the *Scots Magazine* for November, 1786, of Bourrit's notorious pamphlet about the conquest of Mont Blanc that year, in which he robbed his rival, Doctor Michel Gabriel Paccard, of the credit for the victory, and gave the whole of it without justification to the porter, Jacques Balmat.⁴ This *Scots Magazine* translation⁵ has hitherto been accepted as the first account in our language of the attainment of a really high snow mountain in the Alps, and the first publication in English of an article wholly given to such an expedition, successful or not.

During the Second World War, I came by chance on this and three other old volumes of the *Scots Magazine* in an obscure antiquarian shop; and when I examined my purchase, I found something of mountain interest in each of the four. The latest volume, that for 1788, gave the earliest of many translations of H.-B. de Saussure's *Relation Abrégée* of his ascent of Mont Blanc (1787) in its January number;⁶ the volume

¹ M.-T. Bourrit, *A Relation of a Journey to the Glaciers in the Duchy of Savoy*, translated by C. and F. Davy, Norwich, 1775, with second, third, and fourth editions in 1776, published at Norwich, Dublin, and London respectively. The source was Bourrit's *Description des glacières, glaciers, & amas de glace du Duché de Savoie*, Genève, 1773. In his next book, *Description des aspects du Mont Blanc, . . . & de la découverte de la Mortine* [i.e., du Buet], Lausanne, 1776, Bourrit dropped the account of the conquest of the Buet by the de Lucs, and substituted his own 'discovery of the Buet' which he had ascended from a different side in 1775, and to which he gave the name 'La Mortine.'

² William Coxe, *Sketches of the Natural, Civil, and Political State of Swisserland*, London, 1779, pp. 283-285; third edition (extended) under a new title in 1789, later editions in 1794 and 1801.

³ The *Annual Register* for 1779, vol. 22, 1780, p. 96.

⁴ M.-T. Bourrit, *Lettre de M. Bourrit sur le premier voyage fait au sommet du Mont Blanc*, Genève, 20 Septembre, 1786. The translation in the *Scots Magazine* for November, 1786, as also a reprint of the original pamphlet which appeared in the *Mercure de France*, p. 37, on November 4, 1786, were from a first edition of Bourrit's pamphlet of which no copy is known to have survived; but a few copies of a second (altered) edition, and of contemporary reprints and translations (into German) of that edition, still exist.

⁵ The *Scots Magazine*, vol. 48, p. 526, November, 1786; reprinted by H. F. Montagnier in *A.J.* 25. 609-612, 1911; copied from the last by H. Dübi in *Paccard wider Balmat*, 1913, pp. 285-287.

⁶ The *Scots Magazine*, vol. 50, p. 25, January, 1788. This same translation also appeared, perhaps simultaneously, in the appendix to the volume of the *Monthly Review* for 1787 (vol. 77, appendix, p. 532), and it was subsequently reprinted (from the *Monthly Review*) in the *Annual Register* for 1788 (vol. 30, p. 144) which was not published until 1790. This translation preceded the different one which was published as an appendix in the second edition of Thomas Martyn's *Sketch of a Tour through Swisserland*, 1788, p. 97. The earliest account in English of de Saussure's famous ascent of Mont Blanc (the third in all) was published in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, vol. 57, part 2, p. 874, October, 1787, as a translation of de Saussure's letter in the *Journal de Genève* of August 15, 1787.

for 1787 gave a translation of de Saussure's description of the Chamonix guides and chamois hunters,⁷ taken from the second volume of his *Voyages dans les Alpes*.⁸ The volume for 1786 gave the translation of Bourrit's infamous pamphlet about the conquest of Mont Blanc in that same year, as mentioned above ; and the earliest of the four volumes, to my surprise and delight, contained the hitherto unrecorded account of Bourrit's attempt to climb Mont Blanc over the Aiguille and Dôme du Goûter in 1784 which is the subject of this paper.⁹

Bourrit's article in question, which is reprinted below, has more than one point of interest. In the first place, there is the riddle of its source. He published one of his many books in 1785 ;¹⁰ and at first sight the *Scots* article looks very like a translation of the last chapter of this book. But the early appearance of that translation in January, 1785, at least suggests a different original source, published in the previous year ; and the inclusion in the *Scots* article of details which are *not* mentioned in the book confirms this surmise, as do other differences. Thus the introductory and concluding paragraphs differ radically in the two cases ; the time (5 P.M.) at which Bourrit regained the valley is recorded in the article, but not in the book ; the article, but not the book, relates that it was Cuidet who returned to Bourrit with the story of the first ascent of the Dôme du Goûter, whilst his unnamed companion (the book shows him to have been Marie Couttet) went straight back to Chamonix without returning to Bourrit ; and although there are many apparently identical passages in the two publications, there are also many small differences of the sorts mentioned above. Further, the inclusion in the *Scots* translation of the words 'last year (1783)' seems to indicate clearly that the original source was published in 1784, the year before that of the publication of the book.

There can in fact be little doubt that the original source of the translation was a hitherto unrecorded pamphlet published by Bourrit in the autumn of 1784 soon after his expedition. As far as present records go, Bourrit is known to have published a polemical pamphlet in 1773 against A.-C. Bordier, the anonymous author of an account of a visit to Chamonix which appeared just before Bourrit's own first book, and stole some of its thunder.¹¹ His next known pamphlet is the notorious one about Dr. Paccard's conquest of Mont Blanc, published in 1786. In the following year he is known to have published two pamphlets, the first about the respective ascents of Mont Blanc by H.-B. de Saussure and Mark Beaufoy, and the second about his own passage of the Col du Géant, in which he suppressed the fact that it had previously been crossed by C.-F. Exchaquet earlier in the same year,

⁷ The *Scots Magazine*, vol. 49, p. 235, May, 1787.

⁸ Published at Neuchâtel in 1786.

⁹ The *Scots Magazine*, vol. 47, p. 29, January, 1785.

¹⁰ M.-T. Bourrit, *Nouvelle description des glaciers et glacières de Savoye, particulièrement de la vallée de Chamouni & du Mont Blanc, & de la dernière découverte d'une route pour parvenir sur cette haute montagne*, Genève, 1785. See chapter 27, p. 295.

¹¹ See D. W. Freshfield, *Life of H. B. de Saussure*, 1920, p. 193.

1787.¹² Pamphleteering seems to have been an almost major industry in Geneva and Lausanne during much of the eighteenth century,¹³ and it is probable that Bourrit, a rabid publicist, was the author of many more than those mentioned above. I suspect, for instance, that his own ascent of the Buet may have been recorded in that manner, and also, perhaps, the attempt on Mont Blanc of the Chamonix guides in 1775. Bourrit is known to have broadcast his 'Paccard' pamphlet to the editors of foreign journals, and it is at least possible that the 'surmised' pamphlet of 1784 may have been reprinted in the original French, for instance in some Parisian journal; but at the time of writing, the translation published in the *Scots Magazine* is the earliest known account in any language of the ascent of a really high snow mountain in the Alps—here, the Dôme du Goûter. That fact is its second point of interest.

A third point of interest is the light which the *Scots* article throws on the character of Bourrit, its author. One motive in mountain climbing is the private pleasure which it gives—the motive of self-satisfaction. Another motive—that of self-expression—may in some cases satisfy a craving for self-display, either for the pleasure of being admired, or for the social and material advantages which notoriety sometimes may bring as secondary effects. In cases of climbing for self-expression rather than for self-satisfaction, an audience is needed, and what is displayed to it must surpass common standards of achievement if the climber's objective is to be gained; and these requirements introduce an element of competitive rivalry, which is often the cause of bitter jealousy. Bourrit's attitude to mountaineering was one of almost pure self-expression, and although social and commercial motives were strong in him, his over-weening vanity also sought admiration for its own sake. He wished to be known as the one and only explorer of the Range of Mont Blanc; he wished to possess it all, the valley, the glaciers, the Monarch itself, and the achievements wrought thereon; and he could brook no rival amongst amateurs. When Bordier's simple little book challenged Bourrit's sole possession of the valley, Bourrit turned on him. When Bourrit first published the narrative of his ascent of the Buet in 1775 from the side of Valorsine (certainly a new route),¹⁴ he

¹² These two pamphlets are sometimes quoted as a single one, as they were by Freshfield, Montagnier, and Dr. Dübi. Copies in my own possession show that they were issued separately, each with its own page numbering. The title of the first was: *Lettre de M. Bourrit à Miss Craven sur deux voyages faits au sommet du Mont Blanc; l'un, par M. le Professeur De Saussure, l'autre, par M. le Chevalier Beaufoy*, dated, De Chamouni ce 13 Août 1787. The other pamphlet is titled: *Extrait du voyage de M. Bourrit en Piémont par la Mer de Glace de Chamouni, du 28 Août 1787*. When H. F. Montagnier found copies of these very rare pamphlets after many years' search, he reprinted them privately at San Remo in 1911 under the common title: *Lettre de M. Bourrit à Miss Craven*. It is of course possible that Bourrit had combined the two in a second edition.

¹³ According to Freshfield, *Life of de Saussure*, p. 304, there exists a bibliography (doubtless incomplete) of 5,885 pamphlets published between 1735 and 1795 in Geneva alone. This works out at an average of not far short of two new pamphlets a week over the whole period!

¹⁴ M.-T. Bourrit, *Description des Aspects du Mont Blanc, . . . & de la découverte de la Mortine [i.e. du Buet]*, Lausanne, 1776, pp. 119–169.

renamed the mountain, claimed it as his 'discovery' in the title, and referred to the previous ascents by the de Lucs only in slight passing allusions—although Bourrit did give the de Lucs greater credit in a later work.¹⁵ Bourrit even tried to belittle de Saussure's performance at the latter's first attempt to climb Mont Blanc, which they made together in 1785 by the route which Bourrit had attempted in the previous year and had described in the article which is the subject of this paper. In 1786, as his cruel pamphlet shows, Bourrit's venom against Dr. Paccard, the conqueror of Mont Blanc, knew no bounds. In the description of his passage of the Col du Géant in 1787,¹⁶ Bourrit called it 'a discovery equivalent to that of Mont Blanc,' and, by completely suppressing the fact that C.-F. Exchaquet had made the crossing two months earlier, Bourrit presented his own exploit as if it had been the first to be made by an amateur.

The translation in the *Scots Magazine* adds to this list of self-expressions, in which it occupies an intermediate position in time. In his opening paragraph Bourrit now claims the Buet as his own 'discovery' without any mention of the de Lucs. In the reference to his attempt on Mont Blanc (by the Chamonix route) in 1783, Bourrit suppresses the fact that Dr. Paccard not only took part in it, but forced his way into the séracs and amongst the crevasses of the Jonction whilst Bourrit himself stayed behind on dry land. But, worst of all, Bourrit does not mention, or even hint, that Paccard had made the first known exploration of this same route to Mont Blanc over the Aiguille du Goûter only a few days before the expedition which Bourrit describes as if it was his own new 'discovery.' What Bourrit does *not* say in the *Scots Magazine* (nor in his 1785 book) is a fourth point of interest; and Bourrit's account of his own expedition cannot in fairness be given without an attempt to repair the omission.

What we know of Michael Gabriel Paccard's explorations of Mont Blanc before the year of his conquest of the mountain in 1786 is derived from his so-called *Journal*, a private record of the early attempts on Mont Blanc (and of the ascents up to 1827) which bears every mark of accuracy and reliability.¹⁷ Having attempted Mont Blanc by the Chamonix route in 1783 with Bourrit, he next made the first known exploration of the Géant glacier early in June, 1784, in order to see if it offered an approach to Mont Blanc. Paccard then probably turned at once to the possibility of an approach over the Aiguille du Goûter,

¹⁵ *Nouvelle description des glaciers, etc.*, Genève, 1785, p. 185.

¹⁶ *Extrait du voyage de M. Bourrit en Piémont par la Mer de Glace de Chamouni, du 28 Août 1787.*

¹⁷ Paccard's *Journal* was brought to light by C. E. Mathews and was left by him to the Alpine Club, its present possessor. Parts of Paccard's *Journal* were translated in C. E. Mathews' *Annals of Mont Blanc*, 1898; most of it was reproduced in the original, but somewhat modernised, French by Dr. H. Dübi in his book, *Paccard wider Balmat*, 1913, pp. 258–273; and the entries concerning the early attempts on Mont Blanc were retranslated by E. H. Stevens and incorporated by him in his most valuable attempt to reconstruct Paccard's 'lost' narrative of the conquest of Mont Blanc in *A. J.* 41. 98–154, 1929. See also *A. J.* 42. 94, 165, 1930; 46. 1, 1934; 47. 197, 1935; and 49. 1, 1937.

which he had attempted in 1775 with Thomas Blaikie, the Scots landscape gardener.¹⁸ This I infer from a hitherto unrecorded botanical note in Paccard's *Journal* which caught my eye because it was dated, and read: '1784 juin 20 *Bartsia alpina* sur le rocher au planet.' There can be little doubt that the place mentioned in the note was the chalet of le Planet, close under the summit of Mont Lachat—the point next below Les Rognes on the ridge which leads up to the Aiguille du Goûter; and Paccard's curious movements in September may be explained if he had *previously* (on June 20?) examined the Aiguille du Goûter with not too encouraging results, and had hoped to find a better way to Mont Blanc on that side of the mountain. Towards the end of August, 1784, Paccard met de Saussure for the first time, and he impressed the Genevese professor by his bearing and by his keen desire to climb Mont Blanc. We cannot doubt that Paccard opened his heart to de Saussure, and told him about his ambitions, his explorations, and his future projects—as may be inferred from an entry in de Saussure's private diary.

On September 9, 1784, Paccard left Chamonix at 3 P.M. with his body-guide Henri Pernet to make one of the greatest expeditions in the early history of mountaineering. He crossed the Col de Voza and reached the village of Bionnassay at nightfall. Having supped there, he quitted the Bionnassay valley (which leads up to the Aiguille du Goûter) and descended to La Villette, where he borrowed a barometer to replace his own one, which had been broken on the way. A youth, J. B. Jacquet, was added to the party there, and Paccard then went on to La Gruvaz and reached the Chalets de Miage at 3 A.M., where he waited for the dawn. The view of the head of the French Miage glacier and of the Aiguille de Bionnassay from that side cannot have suggested an easier approach to Mont Blanc than that over the Aiguille du Goûter, and in any case Paccard next crossed the Col de Tricot to regain the Bionnassay valley at the snout of its glacier. There the guide gave up, and Paccard went on with the youth to Les Rognes, and thence to Tête Rousse, from which he reached the rocks of the Aiguille du Goûter. On these he slipped at one place, and wrote his name on the rock to record the event, after which he continued the ascent and had reached a point on the Aiguille within five hundred feet of the summit by 6 P.M., when the bad state of the snow and the near approach of darkness forced him to turn back after he had read his barometer, as he did at different points during the expedition. He descended to the snout of the Bionnassay glacier, recovered his guide there at nightfall, and crossed between Mont Lachat and the Col de Voza to the Chamonix valley. When he finally reached Chamonix at 3 A.M. on September 11, he had been in almost continuous movement for thirty-six hours, had covered a map distance of twenty-eight miles, and the total of his ascents had been between 12,675 and 14,200 ft., the exact figure depending on the point at which he crossed the Voza-Lachat ridge. So ended an expedition

¹⁸ Thomas Blaikie, *The Diary of a Scotch Gardener*, edited by Francis Birrell, 1931, p. 77; see also, *A. J.* 45. 22, 1933.

which we might well regard as an amazing feat even were it to be made on the familiar paths and ground of to-day. As Paccard wrote to de Saussure in 1785: 'deux jours et deux nuits de marche continuelle demandoient bien le repos que je vins chercher à Chamouni' ¹⁹

The letter just quoted was written by Paccard to de Saussure on September 25, 1785, immediately after de Saussure's attempt on the same route with Bourrit. It gave details about Paccard's observations in 1784, and it clearly stated that Paccard's pioneer attempt by the Aiguille du Goûter was made eight days before Bourrit's attempt that year. De Saussure added the date to the letter (which was undated) in his own hand, and wrote to Paccard in answer to it. Meanwhile Bourrit's book of 1785 ²⁰ had appeared, and Bourrit's omission of Paccard's name from the short account of their joint attempt in 1783, and his complete suppression of Paccard's pioneer exploration of the route by the Aiguille du Goûter, must have hurt the village doctor. Paccard had written to de Saussure in the letter mentioned above that he was eagerly awaiting the publication of de Saussure's work—the second volume of the *Voyages dans les Alpes*, on which de Saussure was then engaged. Perhaps Paccard believed that truth would prevail, and that his own important explorations would be given the credit due to them when de Saussure's book appeared.

If so, Paccard must have been disappointed. The new volume was published in 1786 before the beginning of summer, and Paccard's name does not even appear in the chapter which de Saussure devoted to the attempts on Mont Blanc up to 1785, although by far the greater part of that chapter is concerned with the route by the Aiguille du Goûter and de Saussure's own attempt on it. Indeed, far from giving Paccard due credit for his pioneer exploration of the Aiguille du Goûter, de Saussure wrote that 'M. Bourrit was the first to make known this route' when explaining why he associated Bourrit in his own attempt on it in 1785—a subtlety, perhaps, and literally true, although to casual reading it seems to name Bourrit as the discoverer. In the cases of Bourrit's and Paccard's attempts, de Saussure seems to have adopted Bourrit's stories, even to the extent of honouring (as it were) Bourrit's suppressions when he himself knew the truth of the matter. I find it difficult to understand or to excuse de Saussure's behaviour here and elsewhere. In his *Life of de Saussure* (p. 223), Freshfield, who greatly admired his subject, nevertheless suspected that de Saussure was jealous of the younger man, Paccard; and de Saussure certainly did not play a noble part in defense of the victims of Bourrit's jealousy. He, and perhaps he alone, could have stopped Bourrit's evil attack on Paccard after the conquest of Mont Blanc, but he allowed it to persist in the second edition of Bourrit's pamphlet, and told Bourrit that he was satisfied with what was a wholly inadequate postscript added in that edition. Later, when much harm

¹⁹ See H. Dübi, *Paccard wider Balmat*, 1913, p. 39, where the letter is reproduced. For Paccard's account of his expedition (translated), see E. H. Stevens in *A. J.* 41. 115, 1929.

²⁰ M.-T. Bourrit, *Nouvelle description, etc.*, Lausanne, 1785.

had been done, de Saussure might still have secured justice for Paccard in the *Relation Abrégée* of his own ascent of Mont Blanc by the addition of a paragraph in place of the few short lines in which he alluded to the conquest. Similarly, de Saussure, in the account of his sojourn on the Col du Géant in 1788, which he gave in the fourth volume of his *Voyages dans les Alpes* in 1796, might have given due credit to Exchaquet for the part he had played in opening that great pass.

Even if de Saussure may perhaps have been moved by jealousy, I do not think that jealousy was the main, or even a considerable, factor in his behaviour. Although he was one of the most important members, and sometimes the spokesman, of the ruling class of citizens in Geneva, and was owner of the largest house in the city (in which he had been besieged by the mob during the insurrection of 1782), de Saussure tried to play an appeasing or at least a moderating part in the complicated politics of his day. At that time, Bourrit was a rising power in the opposite camp, the party of the *Natifs*. My reading of the state of affairs is that de Saussure, by nature a moderate and an appeaser, had political reasons for avoiding a rupture with Bourrit, and that he therefore refrained from contradicting Bourrit's version of the Mont Blanc story, as he would have contradicted it if he had published the story of Paccard's pioneer exploration of the route over the Aiguille du Goûter, the facts of which de Saussure certainly knew and were fresh in his memory whilst he was writing his account of the early attempts on Mont Blanc. But I think also that de Saussure tried to tell as much of the truth as would not annoy Bourrit, who does not appear to have resented the priority of guides and hunters, although he did resent the priority of amateurs.

Concerning the events of 1784, de Saussure²¹ suppressed Paccard's exploration of the Géant glacier and of the Aiguille du Goûter, and confined himself to Bourrit's later attempt on the latter route. In as far as it serves this present purpose, what de Saussure wrote may be given here as it appeared in the first English translation of the chapter:²² 'M. Bourrit, who interested himself more than I did in the conquest of Mont Blanc, thought he ought to try it by some other side; he gained from all parts all the intelligence he could; at length he learned that two hunters in following some chamois had got on some ridges of rocks to so very great a height, that from the place to which they were come, to the summit of Mont Blanc, there remained no more than four or five hundred toises [i.e., about 2,560 to 3,200 ft.] to get up by the declivities of snow which were not very rapid . . . Charmed with this discovery, M. Bourrit ran [i.e. hurried] to La Grue, the village where these hunters lived, and immediately engaged them to make another trial with him. He left the village the same evening . . .' The point reached is evidently meant to be the Aiguille du Goûter, which is

²¹ H.-B. de Saussure, *Voyages dans les Alpes*, vol. 2, Neuchâtel, 1786, chapter 52, p. 553 (4th edition).

²² Pinkerton's *Voyages and Travels in all Parts of the World*, vol. 4, London, 1814, p. 678.

3,163 ft. lower than the summit of Mont Blanc and is separated from the latter by easy slopes except on the final ascent by the Bosses arête.

This story about the two hunters is given by de Saussure alone. It is not mentioned by Bourrit²³ (but that proves nothing), nor by William Coxe, and the silence of Paccard's *Journal* is as significant as were his curious movements during his own exploration. The roundabout way taken on that occasion seems to be a definite proof that he shunned the Aiguille du Goûter until he saw that there was no easier route to Mont Blanc on that side of the mountain; and Paccard would surely have made straight running for the Aiguille had he known that its summit had already been reached. Further, had that been the case, he must have heard of it in Bionnassay, La Villette, or La Gruvaz itself, the hamlet of the reputed hunters; and he would have mentioned the fact in his *Journal*—a record kept for his own information. It is therefore most unlikely (to say the least) that two hunters reached the Aiguille du Goûter, or thereabout, *before* Paccard's exploration; but it is of course possible that (unknown to Paccard) they did so later, on hearing of Paccard's exploit, and therefore during the few days between that and Bourrit's attempt. Even this scarcely fits the events as we know them, and there may be another explanation of de Saussure's story. It is at least possible that he tried to give what he could of the facts without at the same time estranging Bourrit; and that his two hunters are a sort of masked allusion to Paccard's exploration, but described as if made by professionals, because Bourrit had little or no objection to pioneer achievements by professional hunters or guides.

De Saussure's story at least gives one significant piece of information: that Bourrit turned *suddenly* to his objective on hearing that the way had already been blazed—it does not matter by whom. This indicates that Bourrit received information which caused him to alter his plans if he had any, or at least to make a new plan at short notice, and to hurry to his new objective. The questions of Bourrit's movements and of the likely history of the few days between Paccard's and Bourrit's attempts are therefore raised. Here Paccard's *Journal* and two of Bourrit's books²⁴ give us some definite dates: Paccard returned to Chamonix in the early hours of September 11, and it was on that same day that Bourrit set out, certainly from Geneva, because he went to Sallanches. Bourrit's two guides, who were summoned by letter, left Chamonix on September 15, to meet him at La Gruvaz (according to

²³ But see M.-T. Bourrit, *Description des Cols ou Passages des Alpes*, Genève, 1803—AN XI, pp. 62–63. Bourrit there quotes the flattering sentence from de Saussure's account of his expedition, and then alludes to the two hunters, but without mentioning de Saussure's statement that they had preceded him on the Aiguille du Goûter. Bourrit's account of his attempt in 1784 is headed (p. 51): 'Première tentative pour parvenir au Mont-Blanc par L'Aiguille et dôme du Goûté,' and he still suppresses Paccard's pioneer exploration, although Bourrit now includes Paccard's name in the attempt by the Chamonix route in 1783.

²⁴ M.-T. Bourrit, *Nouvelle description des Glacieres*, etc., Genève, 1785, pp. 295–308, and *Description des Cols ou Passages des Alpes*, Genève, 1803—AN XI, pp. 51–61, 63.

Paccard, and probably correct) or at the village of Bionnassay (according to Bourrit in 1803). The party went to the highest chalets in the Bionnassay valley on September 16, and the attempt on Mont Blanc began shortly after midnight on the morning of the 17th.

La Gruvaz might have been reached on foot in one long day's walk from Geneva, and it is within comfortable distance of Sallanches, where Bourrit habitually broke the journey from Geneva to Chamonix, as was then usual. Far from hastening to his objective, Bourrit therefore spent at least five days (September 11 to 15, inclusive) on what he might easily have done in two, and it was on the fifth of these days that his Chamonix guides set out to reach the rendezvous. This strongly suggests that Bourrit had no thought of an attempt on Mont Blanc over the Aiguille and Dôme du Goûter when he left Geneva on September 11, that the idea was suggested during his journey, and that the new plans which had to be made explain the three unaccounted days.

Bourrit's movements may be reconstructed somewhat as follows: He left Geneva on the 11th to pay one of his usual visits to Chamonix, and slept that night at Sallanches. The news of Paccard's exploit would travel quickly, and it would reach Sallanches both from Chamonix and from the Saint Gervais district on the 12th, even if it did not do so late on the 11th. Bourrit, having hired a mule and a muleteer ('Maxime'), then went to La Gruvaz and La Villette on September 12, or 13, to find out what he could, and there, having decided to make the attempt himself, hired two local hunters. His Chamonix guides had then to be summoned by letter, and the evening of the 15th was probably the earliest time at which the whole party could assemble either at La Gruvaz or Bionnassay. If two local hunters really made an attempt to follow Paccard's footsteps, and if their attempt was what Bourrit heard about in Sallanches, he must have been lingering there (as he did on other occasions); and the likely time between the receipt of that news (say, on the evening of the 13th or later) and the assembling of Bourrit's party would seem to be too short for the arrangements he had to make. It may be added that, whatever may have been the event which caused Bourrit to make his own attempt, he *must* have learnt about Paccard's pioneer exploration when he was in La Gruvaz, La Villette, and Bionnassay, where it would be the talk of the day; and ignorance of the fact cannot be pleaded as an excuse for Bourrit's silence. One word may, however, be added in fairness to Bourrit: there is no doubt that he contemplated an exploration of Mont Blanc from the direction of Bionnassay in the previous year, when he had intended to make it;²⁵ but Paccard may well have had the same idea from the time of his expedition with Blaikie in 1775, and nothing can condone Bourrit's suppression of Paccard's exploit, which was not a matter of projects but of fact.

Bourrit's own story in the *Scots Magazine* begins in effect with the assembling of his party, and it ends with the account of the splendid achievement of François Cuidet and Marie Couttet, of which it may

²⁵ See *A. J.* 24. 420, 1909.

be remarked that, in the course of a single day, they ascended about 9,200 ft. to reach the Dôme du Goûter, and made an even greater descent during their return. The original account is printed below without modernisation or other alteration. The first title is the page heading in the *Scots Magazine*, volume 47, p. 29, January, 1785; and the second title is that of the article itself in the text of the page. Bourrit writes in the third person, as he also did in his later pamphlet about his crossing of the Col du Géant.

BOURRET'S DISCOVERY OF MONT BLANC

*Account of the Discovery of the WHITE HILL, or MONT BLANC,
in the Alps.*

By Mr Bourret, of Geneva.

Many descriptions have been written of Mont Blanc, but its summit has ever been deemed inaccessible. The *Buet*, though the highest mountain hitherto explored, is not more than 1578 fathoms; yet its top is covered with a plain of never-melting ice. Mr Bourret [*sic.*], after having discovered the road that leads to it,¹ and visited that place seven different times, turned all his thoughts to find out the means of ascending the Mont Blanc. After various attempts for the space of six years, he made an effort towards the latter end of last year (1783); but after having got very high, he was overtaken by a storm, which compelled him to retire, after a most uncomfortable night, spent in the open air, on the rocks which stood nearest to the heaps of ice and snow.²

Mr Bourret, no wise discouraged by this first disappointment, surveyed the hill, and imagined that it was of an easier access from the defile that leads to the passage called *Bon Homme*, than from Chamouni. Having reached that part of the Alps, he took some necessary informations, and in company with two huntsmen, inhabitants of the hamlet called *La Grue*, two more from Chamouni, and another from Salenche, he entered the vale of Bianocay, situate at the foot of a great plain of ice³ that comes down from Mont Blanc. The vale above mentioned is truly *unique* in its kind; entrained as it were in the very bowels of the earth; its soil is well cultivated, and its situation beautiful and pleasing

¹ Bourrit does not mention the two previous ascents of the Buet by the de Lucs.

² Bourrit, who did not venture upon the ice, fails to mention that Dr. Paccard took part in the attempt and went forward from the top of the Montagne de la Côte into the *Jonction* of the Bossons and Tacconnaz glaciers. Bourrit had *not* made any previous attempt on Mont Blanc. He scarcely set foot on one of its glaciers during a real attempt until 1788, when, at the fifth ascent of the mountain (by Woodley), he himself failed at the Petits Mulets.

³ That is, the Bionnassay glacier.

in every respect. The only way to it is through a craggy foot path, bordered with most dreadful precipices. They arrived at that place on Thursday Sept. 16. 1784 ; but continuing on their way, they reached the last *lactarium* or dairy, where they were welcomed by the only inhabitant, a young girl, who made a fire, and refreshed them with some milk ; after which our bold travellers laid themselves down on the dry grass for a few hours. Between twelve and one o'clock the next morning they went on, preceded by a man bearing a light before them. This method of climbing up hills in the dead of night has its advantages in this—the eye of the traveller is not terrified by the sight of the precipices that stand on each side of him. Besides, the road appears less tedious, as the eye cannot measure the length of the way. They went on in this manner ; and after a fatiguing walk of four leagues and a half, keeping close to the icy plain on their right hand, stunned by the tremendous noise of the torrents, and the rolling down of the ice, imitating in its fall the roaring of the loudest thunder, they stopped till daylight.⁴ They could not help admiring the purity of the sky, the quantity and brilliancy of the stars ; but they observed that as they went up, the air grew keener at every step, and the wind blew vehemently from the heights.

At day-break they resumed their painful task ; they climbed over huge rocks, which, however, as they were solid, proved no great obstacle to them ; the greatest inconvenience they felt was from the most piercing cold, which increased every instant. Having reached the bottom of Mont Blanc,⁵ Mr Bourret put on warmer clothes, and with his cramp-irons prepared to cross an immense plain of ice. Meanwhile, two of his companions attempted to ascend from the opposite declivity, and were soon out of sight. Their sudden disappearance did not create much anxiety, because it often happens, that after several windings round rocks, standing at small distances from each other, the parties at last meet on the same spot. This was not the case here ; several hours elapsed before they were descried again,⁶ standing at the extremity of the icy plain. The first sight of two living creatures on that dreary and frightful spot, as it raised the admiration of their fellow-travellers, excited in the latter a spirit of emulation to join them. They went on, therefore, with fresh courage ; but their progress was soon stopped by such piercing cold, that they began to despair of overcoming this new obstacle. The air was so keen that they felt as if the skin on their face had been raised up by the pricking of a needle. The inhabitant of Salenche could not support it any longer, and was left behind by his companions, in a situation similar to those men who are abandoned in a desert and dreary island.

Although this might be considered as an encumbrance our travellers had got rid of, yet they were not more lucky in their own fortunes. Mr Bourret finding his strength fail him, they bethought themselves of

⁴ Probably at or below Les Rognes, which is about 1,550 feet lower on the ridge than the present Tête Rousse Inn.

⁵ Probably at Les Rognes or a little higher.

⁶ Perhaps on the Tête Rousse, or at the foot of the Aig. du Goûter.

recruiting his spirits with a glass of wine ; but as fate would have it, the two men who had gone before had carried this their only cordial with them : mean while the cold grew so intense, that the thermometer was down four degrees below 0 ; so that the only thing to be done, was to reach, if possible, such spots as were cherished by the rays of the sun. The determination was unanimous. They ranged along the Mont Blanc : ⁷ all their thoughts now turned to their two fellow-travellers, whom they soon perceived climbing up the last rocks that supported the huge colossus. They [the two guides] cried out to their companions, that they felt a piercing and almost unsupportable cold, and that they experienced the greatest difficulties in ascending the rocks. All those, however, they overcame, and were at last discovered standing on that snow-topped mountain, ⁸ which had been hitherto impervious to mortal man, ⁹ and pursuing their way under a sky of an azure so lively and resplendent, that it dazzled the beholder. How wonderful and magnificent a spectacle the ascending of those two men, and their appearing as it were to scale heaven, must have proved for those who were witnesses of their efforts and success !

Mr Bourret afterwards carried his steps another way, towards the icy hill called *Grias*,¹⁰ which leads down to Chamouni. In order to reach its summit, he was obliged to cross two large plains of ice, intersected with wide gaping crevices. On the first of these he felt a shock similar to that of an earthquake, which was instantly followed by a loud and general crack : this greatly terrified Mr Bourret's companion, who was unused to such a phenomenon. Our traveller cheered him up, and taking him under the arm, led him to the brink of a crevice, or rather a frightful abyss, above 100 feet deep. The second hill offered new objects of contemplation : this was covered with snow and sharp pointed pieces of ice. Having with great pain and fatigue reached the extremity of the icy hill, Mr Bourret enjoyed the astonishing prospect of the Great Needles, admired their stupendous and giant-like form, and the numerous flakes of ice they support. Never had any thing so entirely captivated his attention throughout his frequent journeys in the Alps. His wondering eye ranged over the immense distances ; the fields and plains below appeared to him as so many wheel-ruts. The enchanting vale of Chamouni then under him, at the depth of 1500 fathoms, was a phenomenon amongst so many beauteous and awful horrors that surrounded him. Had not recollection brought to his mind that the spots beneath him were inhabited by his fellow-creatures, he might have thought himself transported into a new-modelled world ;

⁷ At a level not much higher than Les Rognes, that is, below Tête Rousse.

⁸ The Aig. du Goûter.

⁹ This is interesting in view of de Saussure's later statement that Bourrit made this attempt after hearing that two hunters had apparently reached the Aig. du Goûter ; it may be a masked hit at Paccard, who had not quite reached the top.

¹⁰ This would seem to have been Point 2,857 marked in B.I.K. to the N. of the Glacier de la Grias and level with Les Rognes. It is not mentioned by name in Bourrit's book.

every thing that struck his sight appearing in so different a light from which he had been used to view those very objects. At that distance from the earth, the latter seems to be no more than a heap of mountains, of inaccessible heights, and ice-topped hills, nothing appearing to the eye but summits of resplendent ice and snow, white vales, and peaks, variegated into a thousand different forms.

Here it was that Mr Bourret stopped to take a little rest. He and his two companions sat themselves down on the brink of a huge rock, their legs hanging down a precipice of a thousand feet¹¹ in depth. This situation, the bare idea of which must strike every one with horror, was by our travellers contemplated with indifference. They felt no anxiety for themselves, nor for Mr Bourret's little dog, who ventured on the smallest juttings-out of the rocks, and skipped from one to the other with all the deliberation and dexterity of the chamois or wild goat. They remained there for the space of an hour, in a climate, where at noon the thermometer fell below 0; nor would they have thought about prosecuting their journey for some time, had not the inhabitant of Salenche, overpowered by sleep whilst in a standing posture, fallen to the ground, and so near the precipice, that a retreat from so dangerous a spot was deemed prudent and necessary; the more so, that Mr Bourret felt himself greatly indisposed. His concern was for the two adventurers who had left him. A world of dangers surrounded them; he feared lest they should have met with obstacles too great for the power of man to overcome; nay, the very keenness of the air in those unknown regions was sufficient to destroy them. All these melancholy reflections greatly contributed to increase the disorder of Mr Bourret, who nevertheless with great pain, and supported by his companion, reached the vale of Bianocay about five P.M. and at last the village of Bionnay,¹² to rest himself a while, take provisions, and return in search of the two missing travellers. This fatigue, however, they were not at the trouble to undergo, as about eleven o'clock at night a voice was heard, vociferating, "Here I am, safely returned from the Mont Blanc." This was Francis Guidet,¹³ who gave the following account: "From the instant we lost sight of you, Sir, and our companions, we journeyed for four hours over the snow, and reached the dome or summit of the Gouté,¹⁴ hanging over the white dale, situate in the Vale D'Aost, in Piedmont. From this height we commanded an immense prospect, with the Alps under us, and so extensive a country, that it was out of our power to estimate it; besides the lake of Geneva and others, all the hills and plains of ice, &c. Here, instead of experiencing any cold, we felt as if placed in a warm oven. We never thought of coming down, till we observed the sun a great way beneath¹⁵ us, and filling so immense a space as struck us with terror. In two hours time we had left

¹¹ Increased to 'huit mille pieds' in the book!

¹² The hour of reaching the valley (at 5 P.M.) and the further descent to Bionnay are not mentioned in Bourrit's book, but the latter is mentioned by Paccard.

¹³ Really François Cuidet.

¹⁴ The Dôme du Goûter.

¹⁵ Probably a mistranslation for 'observed that the sun was low.'

the snowy regions, having slid down by the help of our sticks with such velocity as to lose breath every instant. We did not return over the rocks of the Gouté, but steered towards the icy hill of Bianocay,¹⁶ where you justly deemed the ascent more practicable. In this you were not mistaken, as the rocks there gave us no trouble. Arrived at the foot of the Gouté, and missing you there, we came to this place, where my companion Coulet¹⁷ left me to go back to Chamouni. For my part, deeming it my duty, I stopped here, to put an end to the anxiety you must have felt for our safety."

Thus was the Mont Blanc discovered.—The way that leads to it is easy ; and this success proves that Mr Bourret was right in his notions.

The two hardy travellers, in their way back, discovered a crystal oven,¹⁸ where they could not go for want of time. They also perceived at the height of sixty or eighty fathoms above them, another peak¹⁹ which they were compelled to leave unexplored, as they wanted both leisure and instruments to cut steps on the ice that surrounded it on all sides. By the report of those two men, and the measurement of the top of the Mont Blanc, they reached to the height of 2346 fathoms.²⁰

The reason given by Mr Bourret why the heat experienced by the two travellers should act so powerfully on the body, and yet not dissolve the snow, is, that the amazing whiteness of latter repels the rays of the sun, which, on the contrary, are entirely absorbed by the body.²¹

¹⁶ The Aig. de Bionnassay.

¹⁷ Really Marie Couttet : that he returned to Chamonix without rejoining Bourrit is not mentioned in the book, which does not indicate which of the two (Cuidet) gave the story to Bourrit.

¹⁸ That is, a ' nest ' of crystals.

¹⁹ The Aig. de Bionnassay : The substance of this paragraph was incorporated in Cuidet's narrative as given in Bourrit's book, and ' above ' in the present text may be a mistranslation for ' below.'

²⁰ I.e. French toises = 15,000 feet. This is, of course, too high an estimate. The altitude of the Dôme du Goûter is 14,118 feet, and that of the Vallot rocks, which they nearly reached according to the account given by Marie Couttet to Dr. Paccard, is 14,312 feet.

²¹ This note about the heat is not included in Bourrit's book.