

THOMAS BOWDLER: ALPINE PIONEER

BY SIR GAVIN DE BEER, F.R.S., F.S.A.

THOMAS BOWDLER¹ is well known as an indefatigable expurgator of texts whose name is commemorated in the verb to 'bowdlerize'. It was known from his book² on the Life of General Arthur Villettes that he had visited Switzerland in 1779, 1792, and 1814. It was completely unknown that he was a pioneer entitled to an honoured place in Alpine history. This must nevertheless be the case with a man who in 1779 made the first known passage of the Col de la Vanoise in the Graian Alps from Lanslebourg to Pralognan, thereby anticipating William Brockedon's³ fulfilment of his great ambition by fifty-six years; the first Englishman to ascend Le Buet in the same year, thereby holding the British altitude record⁴ until, eight years later, Mark Beaufoy⁵ ascended Mont Blanc; and the first Englishman to take a practical interest in the ascent of Mont Blanc by offering a reward to the guides of Chamonix if they succeeded in finding a way to the summit.

All these new facts are revealed in a letter⁶ dated September 7, 1779 from Thomas Bowdler to John Strange.⁷ Since this letter deserves to

¹ Thomas Bowdler, F.R.S. (1754–1825).

² Thomas Bowdler, *A short view of the Life and Character of Lieutenant General Arthur Villettes*, London, 1815.

³ William Brockedon, F.R.S. (1787–1854). His account of the passage of the Col de la Vanoise (2,527 m.) is in 'Extracts from the Journal of an Alpine Traveller', *Blackwood's Magazine* (1836), 39, 40.

⁴ The British altitude record appears to have been as follows: 1751, John Turberville Needham, F.R.S. (1713–81), Col du Palet (2,658 m.), Col de la Leisse (2,780 m.); 1779, Thomas Bowdler, F.R.S., Le Buet (3,109 m.); 1787, Mark Beaufoy, F.R.S., Mont Blanc (4,807 m.).

⁵ Mark Beaufoy, F.R.S. (1764–1827). 'Narrative of a Journey from the village of Chamouni in Switzerland [*sic*], to the Summit of Mont Blanc', *Annals of Philosophy*, February 1817; and in G. R. de Beer: 'H.-B. de Saussure's election into the Royal Society', *Notes and Records of the Royal Society*, VII (1950), 264 (reprinted in *A. J.* 57. 313).

⁶ British Museum, Egerton MSS. 2002, folios 33 to 36, reproduced by kind permission of the Trustees.

⁷ John Strange, F.R.S. (1732–99). British Minister Resident in Venice and pioneer geologist (G. R. de Beer, 'John Strange, F.R.S.', *Notes and Records of the Royal Society*, IX (1951), 96). John Strange is the first Englishman known to have observed and commented on the erratic blocks on the Jura. The date of his journey and observations in Switzerland may now be taken as proved to have been 1772. This emerges from Strange's letter of November 25, 1773, to John Hatsell (British Museum, Egerton MSS. 1969, folio 6): 'I last year made a tour [of Switzerland]. . . . Between walking & riding I measured 1500 miles. . . . Some important discoveries in physical geography are the result of this

be included in the basic documents of Alpine history, it is here transcribed in full, as a tribute to the memory of the late Michael Roberts, A.C., whose work on English travellers in the Graian Alps⁸ was the pioneer study in this field.

B.M. Egerton 2002, ff. 33, 34, 35, 36.

[*Thomas Bowdler to John Strange*]

Geneva Sept. 7 1779.

One of the things which gave me the greatest pleasure My Dear Sir when I returned to this place was the finding here Your kind Letter of July 30 which I lose no time in thanking You for most heartily. I am very happy You approve of my crossing Sicily as I did. The road certainly was interesting & as it was an unfrequented one I was the more desirous of examining it but indeed my Dear Mr. Strange You greatly over value my abilities & I assure You I grew quite vain in consequence of the flattering things You are pleased to say of my descriptions. As to my Sicilian observations in Folio I am sure they are heartily at Your Service & since You do me the honor to say You wish to see them I will take the first Opportunity of sending them to You. I will now obey Your orders in giving You a sketch of my Swiss Tour but as You are well acquainted with the Road I fancy You will not be displeased if I travel some part Post Haste ! *exempli gratia*, seven pages.

I left Turin July 11th and crossed the Mont Cenis to Lansleburg. The next morning I quitted the great road & with a Mule & a guide crossed the Vannoise⁹ a very high & curious mountain at the back of Lansleburg. You will imagine this was no joke when I tell You that I was eight hours in crossing it was obliged to pass several beds of Snow & went by the feet of several Glaciers which I then thought fine ones tho' now I should think nothing of them. This Mountain extends towards Mont Iseran¹⁰ & with it forms part of a chain running to the little St. Bernard & the foot of Mont Blanc. The Vannoise as well as all the mountains I saw that Day is of Schistus which I was surprized at for I expected to have found myself in the regions of Granite. After jumping over one branch of the River Isera & feasting in a Chalet I

tour.' In his letter of June 15, 1773, to Albrecht von Haller (British Museum Add.MSS. 23730, folio 29), Strange refers to his 'séjour l'hyver passé à Berne'. In the following spring of 1773 Strange lived at Sécheron and at St. Loup ; he does not appear to have left the Lake of Geneva except for a projected expedition to the Lac de Joux. He did not visit Switzerland before 1772, and does not appear to have done so after 1773 to judge from the addresses on letters from and to him.

⁸ 'English Travellers in the Graians', *A. J.* 56. 51, 157, 252.

⁹ Col de la Vanoise, 2,527 m.

¹⁰ W. A. B. Coolidge devoted a study to the non-existence of 'Mont Iseran'. Here Bowdler is simply referring to the range crossed by the Col d'Iseran.

descended to Pralognan & then thro' a beautiful valley to Moutiers where I slept.

The next Day I went to Conflans crossed the Col de Tamier ¹¹ to Faverges & coasting the whole length of the Lake of Annecy got to that Town & from thence to Geneva. This is the shortest road of any & (I am convinced) the most beautiful for a pleasanter I never saw in my Life. From Lansleburg a person may go with ease to Annecy in two Days & from thence to Geneva in five Hours.

I staid a week in Geneva saw Your friend Bonnet ¹² frequently & Trembley ¹³ once & I assure You I did not forget You. I had a slight view of a Work published by Mons^r Faujas ¹⁴ on the Volcanoes of the Vivarais The Prints seem elegant & I hear it much commended. Saussure is also going to favor us with three Volumes in Quarto about Mountains, the Earth & such things. It is printing by Subscription the first Volume will appear in a few Weeks & I dare say it will be one of the most compleat Works of that kind that has yet made its appearance.

I hired a Couple of Horses at Geneva & the weather being very bad I left the Mountains for the end of my Journey & went to Lausanne, Vevay, Bex, back to Lausanne, Fribourg, Avenches, Morat, Berne, Thun, Lauterbrun, Grindlewald, Thun, Langenau, Berne. Aberli ¹⁵ has just added two large drawings to his collection. Wagner has gone to Paris to publish by subscription illuminated Prints of great part of the fine views of Swisserland. Like my friend Coxe ¹⁶ I was much deceived in my expectations as to the Glaciers of Grindlewald & Lauterbrun but those Valleys charmed me exceedingly. In the last I saw a Rock almost perpendicular & immensely high where the strata (calcareous) do not run parallel but are nearly circular or oval inclosing one another like different Layers or Coats surrounding a Nucleus. I should hardly have ventured asserting this could I not bring as an evidence Dr Martin, ¹⁷ Professor of Botany at Cambridge who observed the same thing. I have since taken notice of the same appearance in other places. Dr Martin is going into Italy & I am much mistaken if You have not great pleasure in his acquaintance.

¹¹ Col de Tamier, 806 m. It was crossed by Thomas Sedgwick Whalley five years later in 1784 (*Journals and Correspondence*, London, 1863).

¹² Charles Bonnet, F.R.S. (1720-93).

¹³ Abraham Trembley, F.R.S. (1710-84).

¹⁴ Barthélemy Faujas de St. Fond (1741-1819).

¹⁵ Johann Ludwig Aberli, painter (1723-86).

¹⁶ William Coxe, F.R.S. (1747-1828), whose work *Sketches of the natural, civil, and political state of Swisserland* was published in London and in Dublin in that same year, 1779. His first visit to Switzerland was in 1776.

¹⁷ Thomas Martyn, F.R.S. (1735-1825), author of *Sketch of a Tour through Swisserland*, London, 1787. He was travelling as tutor to Edward Hartopp of Leicestershire in 1778, 1779, and 1780.

Besides the roads You mentioned You may penetrate by the Grimsel into the Vallais from Oberhasli or You may cross the Mountains to Stans & Lucern. From Berne to Neuchatel, Locle, & Chaux de Fond, & from thence leaving Bienne & Soleure to the right I went a very curious & good road by the Val de St Imier *Pierre Pertuis well worth seeing* dined at Malleray an excellent Inn slept well at Delemont & dined the next Day at Basle. I need not describe Pierre Pertuis to You the Dictionaire de la Suisse does it well. The road from thence to Basle runs close to the Byrsa & is curious *beyond* description. In one place in particular You think You are quite inclosed & I never was so astonished as at seeing the river and a fine carriage road go thro' a Mountain which has split from top to bottom. It is in vain to say You go between two Mountains. It is one. Every convexity on one side matches a concavity on the other. The Strata suit exactly. The road has been made at a great expence & is really wonderful. It runs almost the whole way either thro' beautiful Valleys in the Jura, or thro' such curious passes as the one I mentioned. You see Sir I enlarge a little where I imagine You unacquainted with the road & as this is a fine Carriage Road I would strongly recommend it to Travellers.

Basle, Schaffhausen, Zurich (both the Gessners¹⁸ absent) Rapperschwyl, Einsidlen, Zug, Lucern. General Pfifers Model pleased me exceedingly. He goes on very fast & will have great additions ready next Year. There is no way of going to Stans but by going about a League by land crossing in an hour to Stanstad & another League to Stans all very pleasant. From thence I proceeded about another League then took a boat saw Gersau Brunnen & Schwitz en passant was charmed with the Lake of Lucern & landed at Fluellin & by Altorf Wasen &c. to Urseren. It was in ascending that astonishing valley that all my Mountain Enthusiasm returned. The passage near Urseren is as You imagine cut thro' solid Granite but here I must observe that Posilipo is not as You mention in Your Letter cut thro' Lava but thro' a very soft Tufa.

I cannot tell You how much I was delighted with all these Scenes. I was well lodged at the Lion¹⁹ at Hopital & as I got there in the Morning I let my Horses rest & walked up to the Capuchins to see *Your St. Gothard* which I must own is a pretty enough *little Hill*. I walked back to Hopital in the Evening slept there & early the next Day looked at an immense collection of pretty good Christals at Zumdorf & crossed the Furca.

I had met with but indifferent weather in the first part of my journey but after I left Zurich it was very fine & this Day was remarkably so.

¹⁸ Johann Gesner (1709–90), botanist ; Salomon Gesner (1730–88), poet.

¹⁹ This is still true of Fräulein Meyer's excellent Lion d'Or at Hospenthal. Goethe stayed there in 1775.

And here My Dear Mr. Strange I must once more thank *You* for I should not have taken this road had not *You* advised me to do it. No two peoples tastes ever agreed more than Yours & mine No Day since I left *Ætna* afforded me so much pleasure.

The View of the Snowy Alps from the top of the Mountains, of the Glacier in descending and of Mont Blanc on entering the Valley are delightful. By climbing very high *You* may at Chamony see assemblages of Glaciers that are wonderful but *You* are certainly right in saying that Furca is superior to any one single Glacier at Chamony or Grindlewald & all the world would be of the same opinion were it not that the access to it is so much more difficult. I was surprized here at finding a great quantity of Amianthus. I could shew *You* a piece which I think *You* would say on one side was Granite the other Amianth & I have seen here in the Cabinet of De Luc a Specimen from the foot of Mont Blanc part of which is Granite & part a perfect Asbestos. The Guides who made the last attempt at Mont Blanc assured me that the highest Rocks they saw were Amianth.²⁰ Is Amianth then a decomposed Granite?

I lay well at Munster at the Stadhalderin. The next Day I dined at Brig would have viewed Simplon had the weather continued fine, lay in such a nest of Bugs at Tourteman that I was forced to get up & sleep in my great coat on the floor went the next Day to wash myself in the baths of Leuck saw the Gemmi & Echelles, proceeded to Sion & Martignach viewed the Pissevache & St. Maurice mounted Grand St. Bernard & had the weather been fine would have gone by Aost & Cormayeur & the Allée Blanche to Chamony but as it was foggy I returned to Martignach. The next Day very fine weather indeed began & continued a Week. I went to Chamony by the Col de Balme a very bad but most beautiful Road. At Chamony I staid four Days, mounted the Buet,²¹ ascended the Glaciers of Mont Blanc higher than almost

²⁰ Amianthus is a synonym of asbestos, but it is probable that the mineral referred to is not asbestos but a fibrous low-grade silicate such as polygorskite or atapulgite. The statement that the highest rocks which Jean-Nicolas Couteran, François Paccard, Michel Paccard, and Victor Tissai found on their attempt on Mont Blanc in 1775 contained 'amianth' is important, as it confirms the view that these rocks were the Grands Mulets, concerning which H.-B. de Saussure wrote (§ 1974: published in 1796): 'On y trouve enfin une pierre verdâtre assez brillante, translucide, fibreuse et schisteuse, demi-dure, fusible au chalumeau en un globule de 0.3 de ligne d'un verre verd, translucide, d'un luisant gras, un peu bulleux. Cette substance a beaucoup de rapport avec la stéatite asbestiforme du St. Gothard.' This mineral was the guides' 'amianth'. These rocks were not the highest point reached by the guides.

²¹ Le Buet (3,109 m.) was first ascended from Sixt in 1770 by Jean-André De Luc, F.R.S., and his brother Guillaume-Antoine. In 1772 they discovered the route of ascent from the chalets d'Anterne. In 1775 Marc-Théodore Bourrit discovered the route from Vallorcine, which was probably the one

anybody had been before me ²² & returned delighted to the highest degree. I looked often at Mont Blanc & wishd for the Wings of an Eagle. Saussure,²³ De Luc²⁴ & all the knowing ones say it will allways be inaccessible.

I am not of that opinion ²⁵ the Guides say with proper precautions it might be ascended. I encouraged them to a new attempt & offerd five Guineas ²⁶ as an inducement & four of them were actually to have tried it this Day had the weather been fine but it now rains so I suppose they will not think of it. Had they succeeded I would have gone back to Chamony with proper instruments & have mounted it. I returned here by Salanche on the 2nd instant having employed six Weeks in an expedition which has given me more pleasure than any I have made since I left England except my Sicilian one. You see My Dear Sir I have not made a compleat Swiss Tour but I have seen more than most of my Countrymen & I think I selected the things most worth seeing. I allow Mont Blanc but no other Mountain in Swisserland to be higher than Ætna.²⁷

followed by Bowdler. In 1786 Le Buet was ascended by the Misses Jane, Elizabeth, and Mary Parminter of Devonshire. (The ascent of these ladies is recorded in Bourrit's *Lettre* of September 20, 1786; their Christian names are deducible from *Reports and Transactions of the Devonshire Association for the Advancement of Science, Literature and Art*, XXXIV (1902), 265.)

²² Thomas Blaikie (1750-1838) and Michel-Gabriel Paccard (1757-1827) on September 2, 1775 reached the foot of the Aiguille du Goûter, after crossing the Glacier des Bossons (from Pierre à l'Echelle), the Jonction and the Glacier de Tacconnaz. (Thomas Blaikie, *Diary of a Scotch Gardener*, London, 1931. See particularly *Journal de Thomas Blaikie*, translated by Louis Seylaz, Neuchâtel, 1935, p. 119, and *The First Ascent of Mont Blanc*, T. Graham Brown and G. de Beer, London, 1957.)

²³ Horace-Bénédict de Saussure, F.R.S. (1740-99).

²⁴ Jean-André De Luc, F.R.S. (1727-1817). He was Reader to Queen Charlotte and is buried at Clewes, near Windsor (information kindly supplied by Dr. J. Monroe Thorington, A.C.).

²⁵ Bowdler was not the first Englishman who considered that Mont Blanc might be ascended. In 1773, Colonel the Hon. William Hervey (1732-1815) told Bourrit (*Description des aspects du Mont Blanc*, Lausanne, 1776, p. 147) that in his opinion the only reason why Mont Blanc had not yet been ascended was because nobody had taken appropriate measures to do so. He wanted some day to lay siege to Mont Blanc in accordance with the rules of war. In the same vein the Prince de Ligne asked de Saussure in 1785: 'N'y auroit-il pas moyen d'aller là comme on va à la sape?' This was precisely the technique adopted one hundred and seventy years later by Colonel Sir John Hunt to conquer Mount Everest.

²⁶ The sum offered by H.-B. de Saussure in 1760 for the same purpose appears to have been two guineas: that was at all events what Jacques Balmat received from him in 1786 according to his own statement to the author of an article in the *Juvenile Miscellany* published in 1842.

²⁷ As the height of Mont Blanc is 15,771 ft. and that of Etna 10,758 ft. (in 1900), Bowdler's knowledge of altimetry was patchy.

I have now My Dear Sir obeyed Your commands & by this time I fancy You are heartily tired of my correspondence. Mr. Bonnet ²⁸ desires to be kindly remembered to You. He received a Letter from Burdon ²⁹ yesterday I imagine him now at Venice. May I beg the favor of You to tell him that since I left him at Palermo I have written to him May 11, May 14, June 14, & June 19 chez Mons^r Mertens Venice & have not received one Line from him since I saw him. I shall leave this place in a few Days & go by Lyons to Paris *non obstante bello* ³⁰ take a slight view of Holland & hope to be at Bath by Christmas. Before I leave the Continent permit me My Dear Sir to assure You that I shall never forget Your unmerited kindness to me & nothing will at any future time give me more pleasure than any opportunity of showing my sincere Gratitude. Pray remember me most kindly to Mrs. Strange & believe me with the greatest Truth

Yours &c. THOS. BOWDLER

Mons^r Bowdler chez Messrs Coudere
Pere et Fils & Passavant Lyons

A Mons^r
Mons^r Strange
Ministre de S.M.B.
Venise.

²⁸ See footnote 12.

²⁹ Mr. Burdon was a young Englishman recommended to Charles Bonnet, F.R.S., at Geneva in 1778 by John Turton, F.R.S. (Genève, Bibl. Pub. & Univ., MSS. Bonnet, 75, folio 174).

³⁰ The American War of Independence in which the French took up arms against Great Britain.