

## A CENTURY OF MOUNTAIN PHOTOGRAPHY

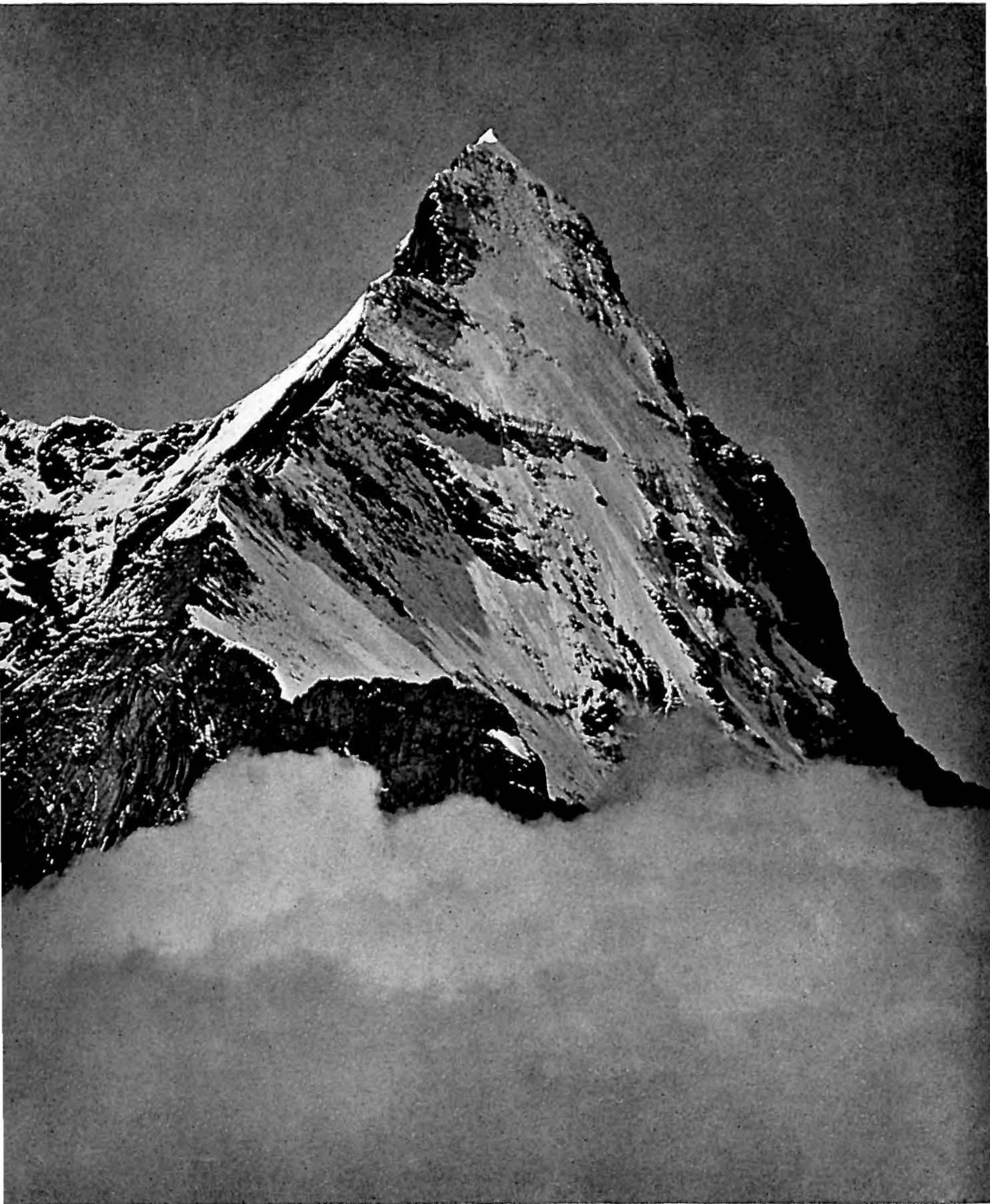
BY C. DOUGLAS MILNER

THE first volume of *Peaks, Passes, and Glaciers* records the expeditions of the members of the Club at the time of its formation. The editors thought it necessary to apologise for the illustrations in the contemporary chromo-lithographic method. Taken as they were from rough sketches, or even the 'recollections' of the travellers themselves, then worked up by artists dealing with 'objects quite out of the range of ordinary experience', it was hardly surprising that they were rarely pleasing even to readers uninformed by their own experience of mountain country. Before long, the use of the camera led to better knowledge of mountain structure and appearance, to the construction of more accurate maps, and to the direct use of photographs, as being superior to the map, when tracing or seeking routes. Though it was still many years before photographic illustrations were seen in the *ALPINE JOURNAL*, considerable use began to be made of them by artists and illustrators. Even the second volume of *Peaks, Passes, and Glaciers*, and certainly the earlier volumes of the *JOURNAL*, show how valuable the new craft was becoming.

John Ruskin claimed to have made the 'first sun portrait of the Matterhorn', by the Daguerreotype process, and other men worked in this early medium, though little of it has survived. In the 1850's, the wet collodion process was evolved, and though this was a marked advance, it involved the setting up of a dark tent, in which the glass plates had to be coated with the viscous emulsion immediately before exposure. Yet some remarkable photographs were made in this way. The Bisson brothers of Paris, 'photographers to the Emperor', used plates as large as 44 cm. × 54 cm. and ascended to the summit of Mont Blanc with a caravan of twenty-five guides and porters, to take three panoramas. Freshfield has mentioned that the Chamonix photographer, Tairraz, also took several small views from the summit. Payot, in his *Au Royaume du Mont Blanc* claims that this work antedated that of the Bissons. Unfortunately, no examples of the prints survive, as they were lost in a Chamonix fire. A photographer in an even grander manner was Aimé Civiale, whose heavy equipment weighed over 500 lb., and needed twenty-five mules to carry it. He thus was restricted to medium levels, where his beasts could go. But his work was for survey and record, and few of his pictures have more than strict utility value.

Less elaborate, but of more direct interest to the Club, was the 1865 tour of the Oberland glaciers undertaken by the first editor of the





[Photo, W. F. Donkin, 1882]

THE EIGER FROM THE METTENBERG.



JOURNAL, the Rev. H. B. George, with a London photographer, Ernest Edwards, of Baker Street. Wet plates of moderate size were used, and twenty-eight prints illustrated a book on the region, a copy of which is still in our library. Professor Ramsay, in his review of the book, said of them: '... as we gaze at the larger landscapes, the subjects seem to grow in size and the accustomed traveller feels alike the truthfulness of the mountain outline, of the crevasses, the ice-falls... we have half a day's journey on some of these glaciers'. (Volume 2 of the JOURNAL, in which this review appeared, also carried the first photograph ever to be used by the Club. It is Mr. Edwards' 'Jungfrau from the Steinberg Alp', a silver print in a brown tone.) The prints in the book itself are still well preserved and of good definition. Except that the values are wrong by modern standards, they are at least as good as average prints from some modern cameras.

By comparison with that of the Bissons, equipment had become more portable, though Mr. George records that it was 'a heavy load for the stoutest of Oberland porters'. Among the claims to fame cited by Cunningham of Ulrich Almer, in *Pioneers of the Alps*, was that he had been entrusted with the 'legs of the camera' on this 1865 expedition.

Mr. George himself took up the craft of photography a few years later, when the invention of the dry plate revolutionised the logistics, if not immediately the results, of alpine work. In his 1869 article, 'Notes on Photography in the High Alps',<sup>1</sup> he detailed his methods, and his final advice to the members of the Club is entirely modern in its phrasing: '... the mountaineer who intends to make a miniature camera his companion in a future tour, will doubtless prefer to try his 'prentice hand at home before going to the Alps, and will seek more detailed instruction... any photographer will be able to advise him'.

His camera was indeed a miniature for those days. A small box about  $3\frac{1}{2}$  inches square, with a lens which packed inside; two double dark slides, each plate being able to take two pictures so making eight in all. After the inclusion of a second lens, evidently of wider aperture than the normal, for 'instantaneous' views, a reserve of plates, and a case, the whole weighed less than 4 lb. His tripod was ingeniously based on his ice-axe, and he anticipated some later styles by a small fitting which could be locked to the axe-blade, and which could also carry a rotating head for panoramas and a sliding plate for stereos. Such equipment, used today, would be able to make first-rate pictures of static subjects, especially with modern materials and filters. Exposures in his day were, by our standards, very long; open alpine views took up to four minutes. But, with his fast lens, a passing effect might craftily be captured in a few seconds.

In the event, cameras of this period provided accurate delineation but

<sup>1</sup> *A.J.* 4. 402.



little more. The results were personal memoranda or basic representations from which artists could work. But the deep alpine sky was rendered as blank white; the bronzen rocks were almost black, the sun shone weakly if at all, and on the ridges or glaciers the mountaineers had to stand in petrified poses.

Mr. George's miniature was fifty years ahead of its time, and in the 'seventies and onwards good landscape work was done with the 'half' plate field camera, and its near sizes of 5 in.  $\times$  4 in. and  $7\frac{1}{2}$  in.  $\times$  5 in. These instruments were to remain the favourites for the next thirty or more years.

Edward Whymper made much use of his own or other photographs, even when preparing *Scrambles*, and in his later years extended the practice. Leslie Stephen was not, I think, entirely right in contrasting it with *Peaks, Passes, and Glaciers* in these words: '. . . look at the poor old chromo-lithographs and compare them with Mr. Whymper's admirable woodcuts. Though some of the old illustrations *copied from photographs* suggest the general outline with tolerable fidelity, most of them utterly fail to represent a mountain at all to an educated eye. . . .' It is fair to suggest that the difference was due to the better craftsmanship of Whymper and his chief engraver, James Mahoney, built upon the sound foundation of photographic originals; in fact to the control of the camera upon artistic licence or defective memory. Even with some of the portraits this method was used. Compare the drawing of Melchior Anderegg in 1864 with Morshead's photograph of Perren, Almer and Anderegg, and its provenance is obvious. The figure of Perren, reversed from left to right, is used also, in the 'Clubroom of Zermatt'.

In the JOURNAL, too, much of the illustration was by wood engraving out of photography. The experiment of reproducing an actual photograph was not repeated until 1881 when an 'autotype' of Donkin's panorama from the Dom was used to illustrate Martin Conway's article on the Saasgrat. This fine print, by an early mechanical process, retains all its quality today.

It is to W. F. Donkin that we owe the beginning of first-rate alpine landscape. He took up photography in the Alps in 1877, with a 5 in.  $\times$  4 in. camera, soon changing to one of  $7\frac{1}{2}$  in.  $\times$  5 in., with a changing box to carry twelve plates—no light affair. Though it weighed between 15 and 20 lb. he preferred to carry it himself, possibly leaving his tripod and other gear to his guides and porters. A scientist, he brought technical skill to his work as well as a wonderful eye for country. Let Freshfield tell us, from the biography he wrote in the catalogue of the 1889 Donkin Memorial Exhibition, what he thought of his work: 'A halt of ten minutes was all he needed to take a photograph. Consequently many of his views, such as those from the summits of the



Weisshorn, the Aiguille du Dru and the Schreckhorn are taken on spots as difficult of access as any in the Alps. His interest in mountains was many sided, and so was his representation of them. He did not always seek to make a picture. But how often he succeeded in doing so ! Look at the view of the Weisshorn seen from the Tasch Alp, with a narrow belt of mist drawn across its base ; the Mönch and Eiger lifting their defiant ridges against the sky above the silver floor of cloud that roofs the lower world ; the sérac draped shoulders of the Monarch of Mountains, from the Aiguille du Midi. It is curious to look at these views and to remember that only a few years ago Mr. Ruskin asserted that the splendours of the Alps all lie below the snow level. After studying these photographs, taken on some of the wildest pinnacles of the Alps, it is difficult to believe that anyone, outside a *table d'hôte*, can any longer be found to question the magnificence of the higher panoramas.'

The three pictures mentioned by Freshfield have been reproduced in the present volume from the actual prints of the 1889 exhibition, which are owned by the Club. In addition are shown, to illustrate other articles, other splendid examples of Donkin's work. The Club owns several albums of his prints, both contact and enlarged. Members may judge for themselves the justice of the claim that he was, before all, the greatest alpine photographer of his day. It must be mentioned, however, that there has been added to Donkin's unerring choice of subject, conditions and viewpoint, and to his skilled production of the negative, the complementary art of the photographic printer. The enlarged pictures, 23 in. × 15 in. in size, are by the carbon process. This involves the making of a second negative and its printing on material which provides the image by carbon pigment rather than silver or platinum. In the making of this second negative, and perhaps in the printing, important adjustments of tonal values have been possible. In particular, the sky tones have been brought down to a mid-grey, which has immediately enhanced the rock tones. Some control, too, has been possible in the snow gradation. A comparison of some small contact prints with the finished pictures shows the considerable changes made. Even for practising photographers today, working with the fine modern panchromatic materials, the lessons of superb definition and skilled printing may be learned from these old pictures.

Donkin was honorary secretary of the Club from 1885 until his death on Koshtantau in 1888. He travelled in several districts of the Alps, notably around Chamonix, Zermatt and Grindelwald, and made two visits to the Caucasus in the company of C. T. Dent. Among his contemporaries, and a friendly rival, was the greatest of all photographers of the next generation—Vittorio Sella. During the 'eighties, they were joint leaders in the winter exhibitions at the Club. Sella





*Photo, André Roch*

THE BIANCOGRAT.



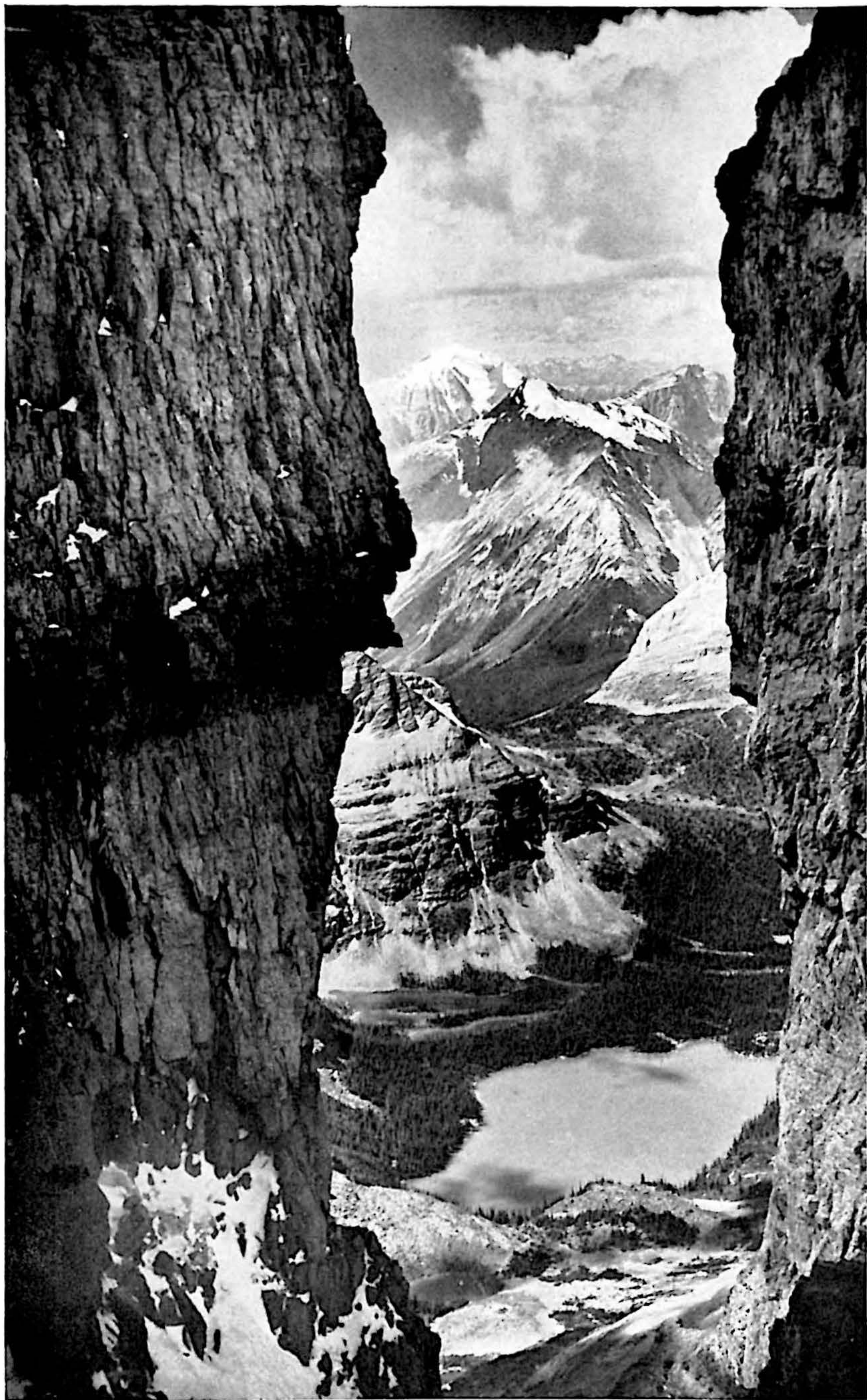
adopted a more formidable apparatus, plates no less than 15 in.  $\times$  12 in. being used, yet he, too, succeeded in reaching the higher summits of the Alps and of the Caucasus. He was, however, rather handicapped by the backwardness of Italian photographic materials, and produced mainly silver prints, made by contact from his original negatives. Eventually, of course, his series vastly exceeded that of Donkin, for the latter's untimely death deprived us of the equivalent of Sella's rich work in his later years. Mr. R. W. Clark has written with eloquence and enthusiasm of Sella's forty years as an alpine photographer. As each improvement in photographic materials came along he adopted it; the telephoto lens in 1891; the colour sensitive plate and yellow screen of about the same period; panchromatic material later; flat films instead of plates; the anastigmatic lens and so forth. His work improved accordingly. Those were the days of large-scale photographic shows attended by crowds of interested people. In 1890, for instance, he exhibited at the Club no fewer than 300 prints, in 16 in.  $\times$  12 in. or 7 in.  $\times$  5 in. In our Jubilee year he presented us with a complete portfolio of his prints, though few of them have survived the years. But the pictures in the present volume, of the Matterhorn from the Col des Grandes Murailles, and of Monte Rosa from the Rimpfischhorn are from the 1907 set.

We must revert for a moment to the 'eighties. Among our members was Captain Abney, the distinguished scientist, who was, in fact, admitted on a photographic qualification. He produced a splendid series of portraits of the alpine guides of the time, for the illustrations in Cunningham's *Pioneers of the Alps*. These portraits, taken outside chalets, in surroundings natural to the subjects, were vastly better than the absurdly artificial studio settings of rock fragments and painted backgrounds, that figure in so many mid-century portrait groups. If the time of real action photography in mountaineering was still distant, at least Abney added to our archives these portraits of men who had done so much to make mountaineering the great sport it had become.

Even without impressions of actual climbing incidents, the value of scenic and portrait work was considerable. Martin Conway and Freshfield, when reviewing the state of the Club, said: '... with the completion of alpine exploration it was said that the *raison d'être* of the Club would cease, and the supply of materials for papers would dry up. One thing these prophets of evil failed to foresee was the growth of photography and the development of the magic lantern... what they could not conceive was that, if the Club could not go to the Himalayas or the Rockies, the Himalayas and the Rockies would come to the Club.'

Messrs. Dallmeyer invented their telephotographic lens in 1891 and before long unusual photographs were being made. At the winter exhibition of 1892 much attention was given to '... a most remarkable





*Photo, F. S. Smythe]*

LAKE O'HARA FROM MOUNT VICTORIA, CANADIAN ROCKIES.



photograph of Mont Blanc taken from Geneva by M. Boissonas at a distance of fifty-four miles with a Dallmeyer newly-invented lens of such extraordinary power that, to all appearances it brings Mont Blanc within three or four miles of the photographer . . . we may affirm that it is now possible, from our Sikkim frontier, to photograph the hidden mountains of Nepal . . . in the rear of Gaurisankar'.

In his later Himalayan expeditions, such as that of 1909, Sella produced a series of telephotographic views that have never been surpassed. Earlier than this, in 1901, Mr. C. E. Shea produced a detailed paper in the *JOURNAL* showing the method and illustrating it by some fine examples of Tyrolese peaks. Dr. Atkin Swan was another successful operator and his excellent telephotograph of the Petit Dru hangs in our gallery.

By the end of the century, for all practical purposes in landscape, colour-sensitive materials and yellow screens provided the serious photographer with all he then, or has ever since, needed for monochrome work in the high alps. Instead of the two or three specialists, there were many members who always included a camera in their holiday or expedition equipment. The great Club exhibitions held year by year were filled with fine prints from many hands—Hermann Woolley, Sydney Spencer, A. L. Mumm, Alfred Holmes, Dr. Inglis Clark, C. T. Dent, E. J. Garwood, O. K. Williamson and many others. It was at this period, too, that the Abraham brothers, then outside the Club circle, began their unique work of recording British crag climbs. Many of their pictures, taken of men actually at grips with a pitch, are valuable historical records. Others, of which perhaps there are rather too many, were manifestly posed and unconvincing. But they helped to create the new style of action photograph which to many of us is the branch of work in which photography is unrivalled. The illustrative artist may stand above the photographer for much of his work, but he can never supply that authenticity, that perfect accuracy of impression, which the good action picture must have.

The chief lady exhibitor of the period appeared under a fine confusion of names. First, we have the interesting snow pictures of Mrs. Burnaby; then, in 1900, the critics are applauding the Norwegian pictures of Mrs. Main, 'the champion lady mountaineer'; by the next exhibition she too has vanished, and there emerges from under her focusing cloth the authentic future president of the Ladies (Lyceum) Alpine Club, Mrs. Aubrey le Blond. Under her last name she attracted some stiff criticism for 'lacking the half tones she usually possessed'. Others did not escape the occasional deprecatory frown. For example, no less a personage than Mr. R. W. Lloyd, the Elder Statesman of our Centenary year, was spoken to rather strictly about the frivolity of his 'new-art' frames.



In 1903 a chromatic cloud no bigger than a man's hand appeared. The Club critic was not impressed: '. . . for the first time, we believe, in the history of the Exhibition, photographs taken by a colour process were shown, at present the invention is evidently in an experimental stage.' By 1907 we have young Mr. Geoffrey Young exhibiting stereoscopic pictures of and on the Aiguilles, and around the same period other real action pictures were produced by Professor H. O. Jones.

We have been carried along by these successive steps of technical progress, but have forgotten to mention the ancillary change in JOURNAL illustrations from the woodcuts of the first thirty years to the half-tones of the twentieth century. The early half-tones were truly awful to behold, considerable obvious manual retouching and shading had been done, and they were vastly inferior to the really beautiful woodcuts of the great Victorian age. Happily, improvement was fairly quick and by 1905 the half-tone was as good in monochrome as it is today. In fact, it is only recently that we have again reached the levels of the best that our JOURNALS could show in the years before the first war.

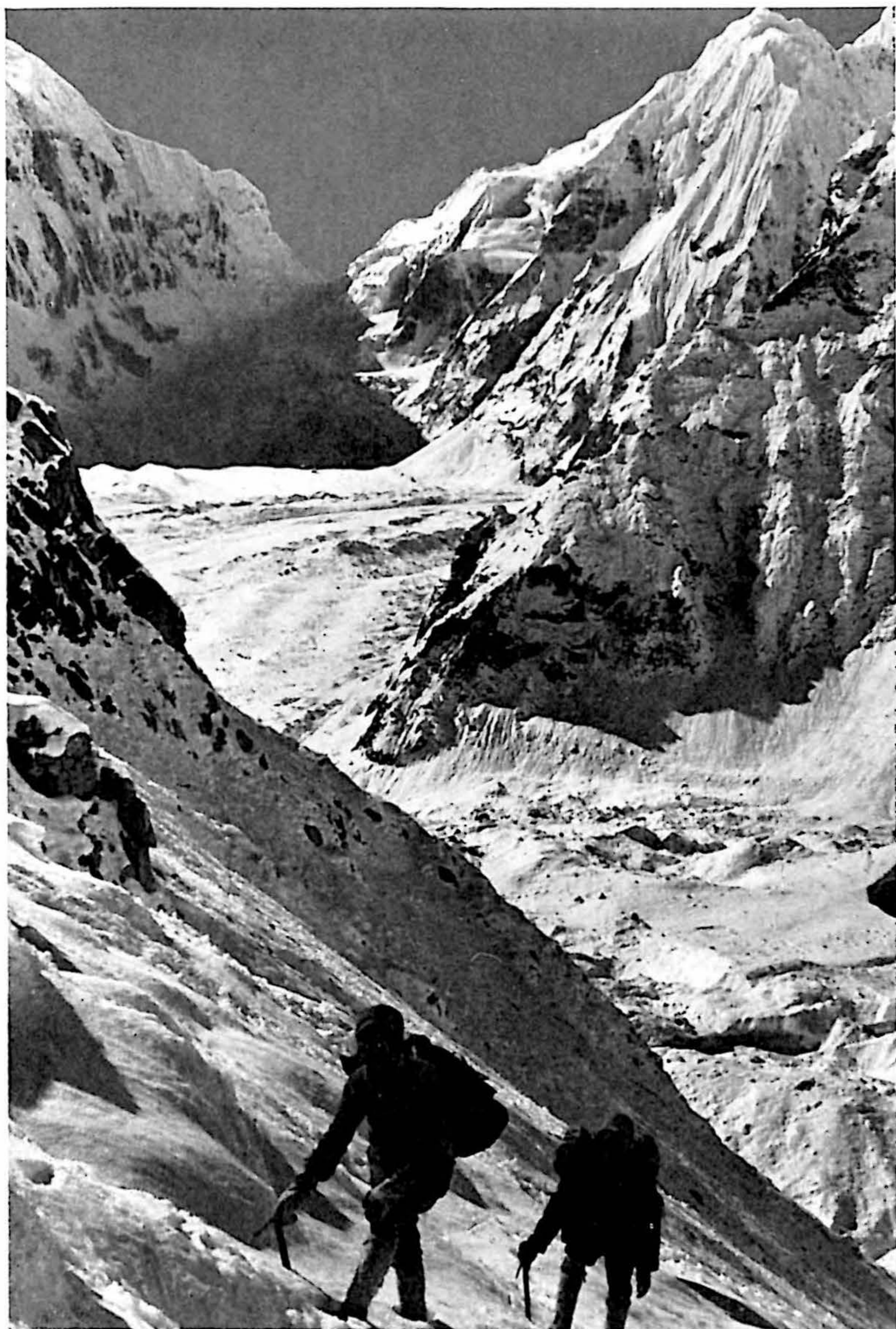
Colour progress was slow. For almost thirty years the Lumière Autochrome plate, used by Dr. Inglis Clark in about 1907, remained the type. Not until the invention of Kodachrome, in 1935, did colour work become possible at the level of brilliance and detail on a screen that the monochrome positive has shown for the last seventy years.

In the years between the wars there emerged really light and efficient cameras for the man of action. The distinctive photographs of actual mountaineering incident came to the men who always carried their cameras, and used them as best they could, from the hand, on the narrow ice ridge or steep rock face. So many names come to mind that it is almost invidious to mention any. But I cannot omit that of Capt. G. I. Finch, whose pictures of the Peuterey arête and other first-rate climbs were, I think, among the best to be taken. Nor should we overlook the early and excellent work in 35 mm. size by Professor Graham Brown in his outstanding series of the Brenva climbs and in the Himalaya. Mr. Frank Smythe remained loyal to the rather larger camera and his considered landscapes of the Himalaya and the Alps were brought before the public through his series of fine picture books.

We are all photographers nowadays and if the era of the exhibitions of massive, framed prints has gone for ever we have in their stead the regular series of slide and cinematograph displays, and our personal collections, with pictures taken almost between one foothold and the next, in situations that would have been impossible with the old apparatus.

It is permissible to wonder if the style of casual shots in colour has not perhaps been carried too far. In particular there seems to have been some deterioration in the technical quality of expedition photographs of





*Photo, John Hunt]*

ZEMU LA FROM SUGARLOAF GLACIER, SIKKIM. SHERPAS : PASANG DAWA LAMA  
AND DAWA THONDUP.

*[To face p. 164.]*



*new* country. The pre-war expeditions did take some care to obtain first-rate topographical records, panoramas and telephotos. And they had to get them without the precision and convenience of modern equipment. Is it too much to ask that future expeditions should add to their numerous 35 mm. cameras, one instrument capable of equalling in range and detail the pictures taken with 9 cm.  $\times$  12 cm. or even 6  $\times$  9 cm. cameras?

But whether we climb at home, in the Alps or in the greater ranges, those of us who give as much time to our photography as to mountaineering, may look back with admiration and humility to the wonderful work of Donkin, sometime honorary secretary of this Club and of the Photographic Society of London, who 'first showed slides to the Club by means of a limelight lantern' and of whose work Freshfield wrote:

' . . . it will long endure as a memorial to the mountaineer who devoted himself to reveal to all men the most inaccessible splendours of the mountains . . . who took us up with him to the pure upper world where the clouds are so often spread beneath as a floor, while the white peaks shine under a vapourless vault. . . . '

[We are particularly indebted to Mr. Milner for having selected, and supervised the reproduction of, the illustrations to this volume. The photographs are, with few exceptions, by members of the Alpine Club and have been chosen, in consultation with several authors, to illustrate the text. Mr. Milner's article is complementary to the selection of plates to the historical articles.—EDITOR.]