

# One hundred years ago

(with extracts from the *Alpine Journal*)

C. A. Russell

'When it did not rain, it snowed; when it did not snow, it hailed; when it did none of the three, it blew.'

This gloomy description, recorded by F. F. Tuckett, summarised the early part of the climbing season of 1871. As has so often been the case, however, things improved as the summer progressed, and during a week of fine weather in July James Eccles, with the guides Michel and Alphonse Payot, made the first ascent of the Aiguille du Plan. A notable date in the history of the Matterhorn was 22 July when Miss Lucy Walker, as one of a party of eight, became the first lady to reach the summit.

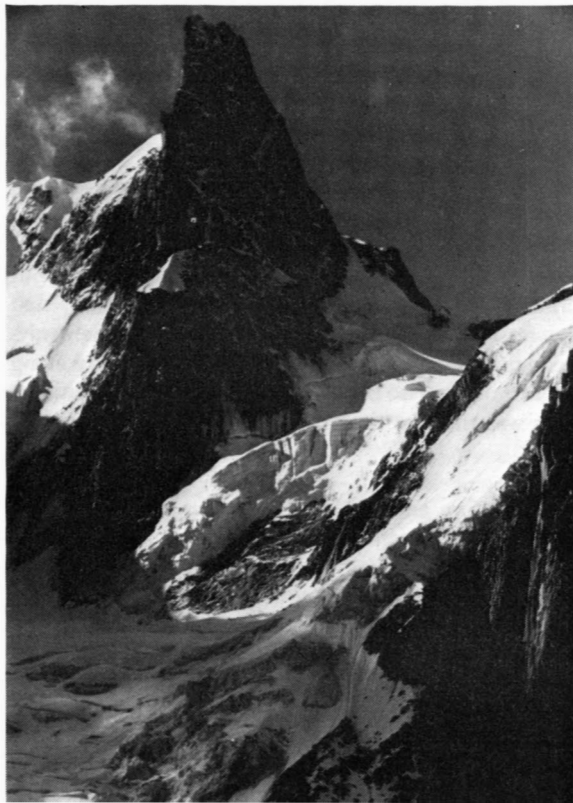
On 11 August J. H. Kitson, with Christian and Ulrich Almer, succeeded in climbing the Weisshorn by a new route, starting at 3 am below the Bisjoch and ascending the steep snow and ice slopes to the upper section of the North ridge. Kitson's wife, who was to look for the party at nine o'clock from the Gornergrat, must have had a long wait, as the summit was not reached until noon, and then only after Almer had cut nearly eight hundred steps. Kitson recorded that he had never been on a summit which seemed so isolated from the rest of the world. 'The top is so small, and the slopes on all sides so steep, that beyond one's feet nothing is visible except by bending over to look down.'

Meanwhile, in the Bernina Alps D. W. Freshfield, with Henri Dévouassoud, climbed Piz Zupo on 14 August by the ridge rising from the Zupo Pass. 'For some distance we enjoyed an easy rock climb. About half way the character of the work suddenly changed, and we passed on to a gently inclined but narrow snow arête. Fortunately the snow was in such good condition, that we were able to tread it down under our feet into a sufficiently firm pathway. Holding our ice-axes as balancing-poles, we walked steadily but quickly along the beautiful crest, which continued to rise before us in wave-like undulations, each higher than the last.' It was the first time the summit had been reached from this direction.

By September the weather was fine and settled. Leslie Stephen, who had arrived at Chamonix, made the first ascent of Mont Mallet with two companions and three guides, including Melchior Anderëgg. On encountering a huge rock about 15 ft in height and 'viciously smooth' just below the summit Anderëgg paid it the unusual respect of taking off his coat. After lighting the inevitable pipe Stephen contemplated the unclimbed Dent du Géant. The verdict of some mountaineers who had been prowling around the base of this astonishing pinnacle was that an ascent might be possible with the help of rockets and a sufficient allowance of rope. Stephen's own view was that 'if



72 *Mont Mallet*. This photo and the next: French Government Tourist Office



73 *Dent du Géant*

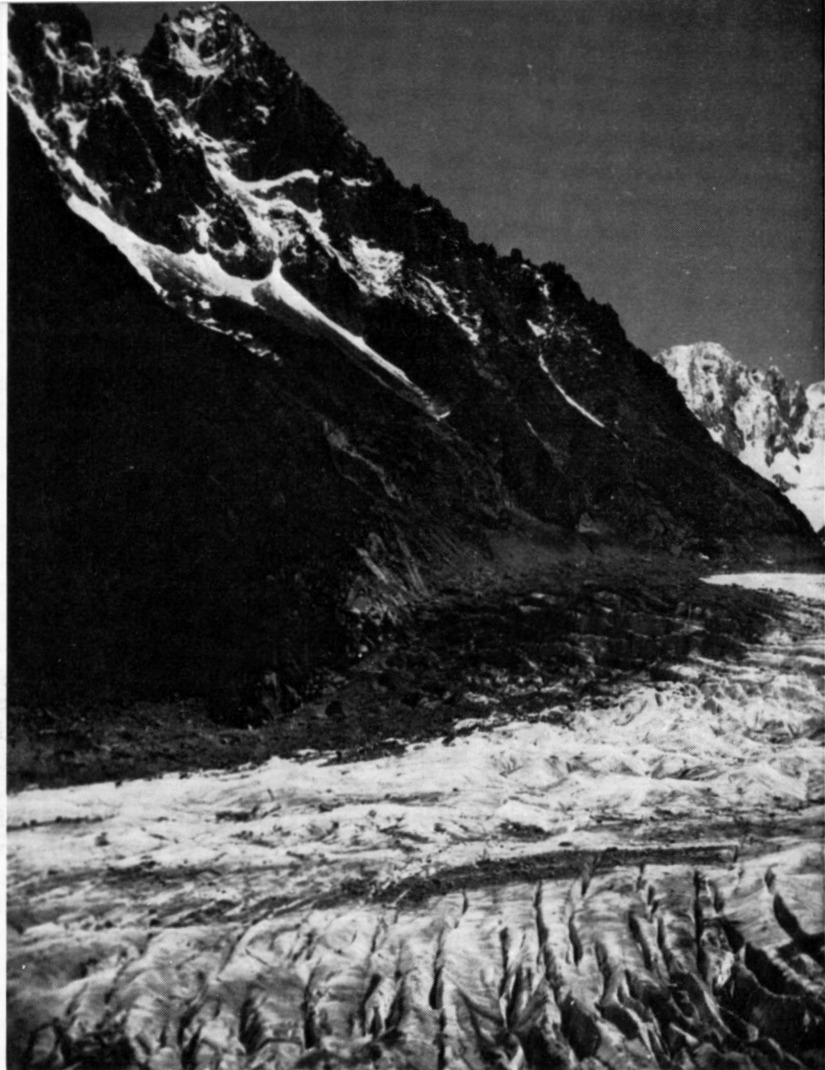
anybody, by fair climbing, ever reaches the summit of the Dent du Géant, I can only say that my ideas of the capacities of human nature will be materially enlarged'. Other peaks climbed in September for the first time were the Portjengrat, by C. T. Dent, with Alexander and Franz Burgener, the Central Peak of the Bouquetins, by A. B. Hamilton and two guides, and the Aiguille du Moine, by the Misses Lloyd and Straton, with J. E. Charlet and J. Simond.

Other formidable parties were also climbing extensively in the Alps. During July the remarkable Miss Meta Brevoort and her nephew, W. A. B. Coolidge, with Christian and Ulrich Almer made the second recorded passage of the Eigerjoch, despite bad weather. 'The ascent of the great wall, which was formed of ice with a thin coating of loose fresh snow, occupied three hours. Owing to very unfavourable weather, no view was obtained, and the party was forced to halt  $5\frac{1}{4}$  hours in a tent on the summit of the pass till the violence of the storm subsided.' This party also reached the summits of the Eiger and the Jungfrau, accompanied by their dog Tschingel.

Between 5 September and 20 September the same party, with the addition of Nicholas Knubel but apparently without Tschingel, traversed the Matterhorn by the Hörnli and Italian ridges, ascended the Weisshorn by Kitson's route from the Bisjoch, climbed the Dent Blanche by the South ridge and traversed the Bietschhorn by the North and West ridges; a performance which even one hundred years later, and with the aid of modern communications, would not be easy to repeat. In just over a fortnight Miss Brevoort was thus able to claim to be the first lady to traverse the Matterhorn and to ascend the other three peaks. It is interesting to note that the ascent of the Dent Blanche was made by traversing the steep slopes under the rocky section of the South ridge and not by climbing the crest of the ridge, as is normally done today.

Another fine performance was that by Frank Walker who, with his son Horace, had taken part in the first ascent of the Brenva Route in 1865, and who was now sixty-three. He climbed the Diablerets, Castor and the Balfrin, with the Matterhorn to crown his season.

As a result of the increasing number of climbers the first huts had begun to appear, and in 1871 the Mountet hut was completed. An early visitor was Mr Marshall Hall who in August, with a guide and a porter, crossed the Triftjoch after a long day which had started at Zermatt. 'The weather became cloudy, and snow began to fall. They missed their way among the rocks, and did not extricate themselves till dusk began to come on, and had to cross the glacier to the moraine of Mountet in the dark and the rain. The Swiss Alpine Club have built a comfortable cabane at the Mountet, which there was great



74 *Aiguille du Moine*. Photo: Edward Pyatt

difficulty in finding, the darkness increasing; but at 9.30pm they fortunately hit upon it, and spent the night there.' The present writer, who has spent a considerable part of his Alpine career endeavouring to locate huts in total darkness, can almost sense the relief the party must have felt on arrival.

No summary of 1871 would be complete without reference to the publication of one of the most famous mountaineering books ever written: Edward Whymper's *Scrambles Amongst the Alps*. Stephen, whose own book *The Playground of Europe* was also published during the year, reviewing *Scrambles* in the *Alpine Journal* wrote that 'the real pith of Mr Whymper's book consists, to my mind at least, in this—that it is the congenial record of the most determined, the most systematic, and, on the whole, the best planned series



75 *The modern Mountet Hut.* Photo: Swiss National Tourist Office

of assaults that were made upon the High Alps during the period of which he speaks’.

The present writer and his climbing companion had the good fortune to spend most of September last year enjoying a variation of the High Level Route. In beautiful weather, and away from the everyday world, we were able to add to our own Alpine memories and to confirm for ourselves that for the mountaineer, despite the passing of one hundred years, the following lines from *Scrambles* require no alteration.

‘If I could blot out every reminiscence, or erase every memory, still I should say that my scrambles amongst the Alps have repaid me, for they have given me two of the best things a man can possess—health and friends.

‘The recollections of past pleasures cannot be effaced. Even now as I write they crowd up before me. First comes an endless series of pictures, magnificent in form, effect, and colour. I see the great peaks, with clouded tops, seeming to mount up for ever and ever; I hear the music of the distant herds, the peasant’s *jodel*, and the solemn church-bells; and I scent the fragrant breath of the pines: and after these have passed away, another train of thoughts succeeds—of those have been upright, brave, and true; of kind hearts and bold deeds; and of courtesies received at stranger hands, trifles in themselves, but expressive of that good will towards men which is the essence of charity.’