

# One hundred years ago

(with extracts from the *Alpine Journal*)

C. A. Russell

'Before the end of January the sunward-sloping meadows round Glarus were already carpeted with flowers, the birds had begun their songs, and the sun shone with a brilliancy more suited to May than midwinter.'

The temperatures recorded in the Alps during the first months of 1872 were unusually high and the weather during the early part of the climbing season was considerably better—it could hardly have been worse—than that of the previous year. Throughout June the favourable weather continued in all the principal regions: in the Dolomites F. F. Tuckett, with Christian Lauener and Santo Siorpaes, completed a new route on the western side of the Marmolata, while in the Bernese Oberland the North-east ridge of the Studerhorn was climbed for the first time by A. W. Moore and Horace Walker, with Melchior and Jakob Anderegg.

The first important new route of the season was achieved on 2 July, when T. S. Kennedy, with Johann Fischer and J. A. Carrel, succeeded in climbing the South-west face of Mont Blanc by way of the Italian Miage glacier and the Rocher du Mont Blanc, reaching the Bosses ridge near the Rochers de la Tournette. After a bivouac on some convenient rocks the party started at 3am and some eight hours later, having surmounted the last steep slopes of the face, they sat down to lunch and surveyed the scene. 'To the left and much below us lay the Dôme du Gouté, its ridge sweeping up grandly until we lost it behind some big rocks. Above us these rocks extended, concealing the head of Mont Blanc, and forming the western side of the Calotte, and we saw that our ascent was secured.'

The climb, while offering no great technical difficulty, provides a direct route from Courmayeur and was a considerable undertaking for the period. Addressing the Alpine Club later in the year, Kennedy commented on the route. 'Respecting this way of ascending Mont Blanc, I may say that there is no reason why, if the Courmayeur guides will build a hut at or near our bivouacking place, it should not be commonly used by travellers who have had some little previous experience. Of course the mountain is steep. Still there is no place that requires anything more in a traveller than steadiness. Nor is there any fear of avalanches if the proper route be taken, and that route is tolerably obvious. On the other hand, the mountain is very exposed to northern and easterly winds; there is not a particle of shelter on it; and it is too steep to allow a party of men to run back quickly, as they may do on the Chamouni side.'

The major achievement of the season was undoubtedly the first ascent of the East face of Monte Rosa by the couloir later known as the Marinelli Couloir—the Marinelli party was swept down by an avalanche during an attempt to



83 *Mont Blanc from the air.* Photo: B. R. Goodfellow

make the third ascent. The route, on one of the finest faces in the Alps, involves nearly 1600 m of serious climbing, much of which is subject to severe objective dangers. On 21 July a party consisting of R. and W. M. Pendlebury and the Rev. C. Taylor, with Ferdinand Imseng, Gabriel Spechtenhauser and Giovanni Oberto, set out from Macugnaga and halted for the night among the rocks on the left bank of the Monte Rosa glacier. Several well-known guides, including Ulrich and Christian Lauener and Christian Almer, had pronounced against the proposed climb, but Imseng, 'a guide unknown to fame, whose ambition it was to ascend Monte Rosa from Macugnaga, steadily maintained that his route was comparatively little swept by avalanches, and would be reasonably safe at an early hour of the morning'.

Shortly after 2am on 22 July the party was about to start the ascent 'when a deep roll from the Zumstein announced that the avalanches were waking early. The first few steps were not encouraging. We groped slowly over the rocks to the couloir, where the leaders floundered into a mass of soft snow, which augured ill for the condition of the slopes above when they should have been exposed for a few hours to the action of the sun'. Conditions were not as bad as they seemed, however, and the climb progressed without serious incident until, on the final slope below the lowest rocks of the Grenzgipfel 'a sudden sliding of the surface through which we trod brought the whole party to an instantaneous halt. Each man planted himself in his steps, and looked on in silence, no sound being heard but the hiss of the snow as it skimmed down the steep slopes on every side'. At length the rocks were gained and finally, after some thirteen hours of climbing, the party reached the Dufourspitze. Imseng, who was then twenty-seven years of age and a *Jäger* by profession, had achieved his ambition and was no longer a guide unknown to fame.

During the same month the Grunerhorn and the Scheuchzerhorn in the Oberland were climbed for the first time, by E. J. Häberlin, with A. and J. von Weissenfluh; Kennedy and J. A. G. Marshall, with Johann Fischer and Julien Grange, made the first ascent of the Aiguille de Leschaux; while in the Dolomites a party including W. E. Utterson-Kelso and C. J. Trueman succeeded in making the ascent of the highest peak of the Marmarole.

The fine weather continued throughout the summer, and on 5 September C. T. Dent and G. A. Passingham, with Alexander Burgener, Franz Andermatten and Ferdinand Imseng, made the first ascent of what is today one of the best-known climbs in the Pennine Alps, the South-east ridge of the Zinalrothorn. Dent recorded shortly afterwards that this was the most formidable ascent he had ever succeeded in making and that the party arrived back in Zermatt 'in an exultant frame of mind, discontinuous suits of clothes and a preposterous state of hunger'. Another important new route was achieved on 16 September, when J. H. Isler, with Joseph Gillioz, reached the summit of the Grand Combin by way of the Col du Sonadon and the Combin de Valsorey. During the ascent Herr Isler discovered the rare lichen *Umbilicaria virginis*, previously known only on the Jungfrau.

Other first ascents during September were those of the Unterbachhorn, by Miss Meta Brevoort, W. A. B. Coolidge and A. Fairbanks, with Christian and Ulrich Almer, and the Agassizhorn, by Coolidge, with Ulrich Almer and Christian Inäbnit. Their dog Tschingel, whose climbing ability was noted during the previous season, accompanied the party across the Agassizjoch.

One member of the Alpine Club who was not to be found in the Alps was Edward Whymper, who during the summer of 1872 made his second expedition to the western coast of Greenland. Whymper recorded that 'the mountaineer in Greenland, besides experiencing all the usual difficulties, meets with some which are the result of the peculiar constitution and structure of the mountains. The whole of this land has been at some early period completely covered by a sheet of ice, and the rocks have been ground down to an extent

that cannot be seen in the Alps'. Another, more human, difficulty, encountered by the traveller in Greenland was described by Whymper as the 'snaps' torture. 'It is inflicted upon him morning, noon, and night. He has to pour out liqueur-glasses full of the nasty corn-brandy in cold weather, in wet weather, and in stormy weather. He has to stop in the middle of important work to do it, he has to stop when time is of the utmost consequence to do it, and he is awake out of his sleep to do it; and he must always do it smiling away, as if it were one of the greatest pleasures of his life. In the short season of 1872, although the "snaps" was cut down as far as possible, I dispensed more than ten gallons of this abominable corn-brandy, which quantity amounted to about three thousand glasses.'

In conclusion, it is perhaps comforting to note the following extract from a paper concerning earlier travels read before the Alpine Club one hundred years ago by A. W. Moore.

'Whatever may be its inferiority as a mountain, as a point of view the Pigne d'Arolla more than holds its own with many loftier and more striking rivals. The weather was anything but perfect, but we saw enough to satisfy us of the grandeur of the panorama, which can scarcely be surpassed unless from the adjoining and slightly higher summit of the Ruinette. So far as we were concerned, this same Ruinette was one of the most satisfactory features in the view, for a reason which will, I am afraid, draw down upon us the contempt of the Club, but which I must nevertheless in candour state. We had long been of the opinion that it was discreditable to the Club that so considerable a peak should remain unscaled, and had decided that, being in the neighbourhood, we were bound to attempt to reduce it to the same state of subjection as its neighbours. This, however, would involve passing a night at the dirty châteaux of Chanrion, on very short commons, and a probability of absolute starvation on the ensuing day—a prospect which, I almost blush to confess, had so few charms for us, that it was with supreme satisfaction we discovered on the summit of the supposed virgin peak an unmistakable stone man. There was no doubt whatever about it, and we promptly moved a vote of thanks to the unknown individual (afterwards found to be Mr. Whymper) who had anticipated our views, and left us free to make our way to Aosta and the fleshpots of the Hotel Mont Blanc.'

The present writer, who understands such views only too well, is glad to find that even the great pioneers had their weaker moments.

## Regional Notes and Reports

*Note by the Editor:* I hope eventually to have an Assistant Editor in this country to be responsible for each of the major areas and to coordinate the work of the various foreign correspondents. Some of these are already in action and I am grateful to them for their efforts on my behalf. Others are still required. In future, the annual notes will be kept as short as possible, and will be supplemented by longer reports issued at intervals. This year it is the turn of Australasia and North America for this treatment.