



88 Piz Bernina, Piz Scerscen and Piz Roseg (Photo: Swiss National Tourist Office)

## One hundred years ago (with extracts from the 'Alpine Journal')

C. A. Russell

The weather experienced in many parts of the Alps during the early months of 1877 was, to say the least, inhospitable. Long unsettled periods alternated with spells of extreme cold and biting winds; in the vicinity of St Moritz very low temperatures were recorded during January.

One member of the Alpine Club able to make numerous high-level excursions during the winter months in more agreeable conditions was D. W. Freshfield, who explored the Maritime Alps and foothills while staying at Cannes. Writing later in the *Alpine Journal* Freshfield recalled his experiences in the coastal mountains, including an ascent above Grasse.

'A few steps to the right and I was on top of the Cheiron, under the lee of a big ruined signal, erected, no doubt, for trigonometrical purposes. It was late in the afternoon, and the sun was low in the western heavens. A wilder view I had never seen even from the greatest heights. The sky was already deepening to a red winter sunset. Clouds or mountains threw here and there dark shadows across earth and sea.

'Far out at sea Corsica burst out of the black waves like an island in flames, reflecting the sunset from all its snows. From the sea-level only its mountain-



89 *Aiguille Noire de Peuterey* (Photo: C. Douglas Milner)

tops, and these by aid of refraction, overcome the curvature of the globe. From our height we seemed to see down to their roots, the capes which break the waters.

'As the sun sank redly in the west, the sea grew more and more grey; the flush died off the Corsican heights and left them wan ghosts on the edge of the world; the last gleams faded from the warm green shores and the red promontories beyond Nice; the icy blast from the leagues of northern frost and snow shrieked past with an even fiercer howl of triumph, as if about to seize on the last strip of sun-protected land underfoot. The dramatic force and mystery of such a scene are familiar to most climbers; they can scarcely be conveyed to those who are strangers to high mountains.'

A successful expedition early in the climbing season was destined to have a tragic ending. On 7 June Henri Cordier, the promising young climber who had achieved a remarkable series of ascents during the previous year, made the first ascent of the Plaret in the Dauphiné with Jacob Anderegg and Andreas Maurer. After reaching the foot of the Plaret glacier and unroping Cordier fell into the glacier torrent while glissading and was drowned.

Despite indifferent weather 2 first ascents of note were made in the Dauphiné during the following month. The summit of the Pic Sans Nom was reached on 10 July by J. B. Colgrove and R. Pendlebury, with Gabriel and Josef Spechtenhauser, while on 14 July W. A. B. Coolidge, with Christian Almer and his second son Christian, climbed the peak which was then known as the Pic du Vallon but is now called Pic Coolidge: the mountain was renamed by the French Alpine Club shortly after Coolidge's ascent as an acknowledgment of his considerable contribution to exploration of the region.

In the Bernese Oberland heavy rain and snow-falls impeded serious climbing until well into July. On the last day of the month G. E. Foster, starting from the Bergli Hut with Hans Baumann and his sons and Fritz Deutchmann, made the first ascent of the NE ridge of the Mönch.

A new route of considerable importance was also achieved on 31 July when James Eccles, with M. C. and Alphonse Payot, climbed Mont Blanc from the SE by way of the Brouillard glacier, the upper plateau of the Frêne glacier and the highest section of the Peuterey ridge. Addressing the Alpine Club later in the year, Eccles explained that he 'had assumed the impossibility of ascending by the great south-easterly arête between the Mont Blanc de Courmayeur and the Aiguille Blanche de Péteret' until he saw in a shop window in the Strand a photograph of the S face of Mont Blanc. 'The photograph showed part of the arête nearly in profile; and besides, the upper portion of a broad couloir descending from the arête towards the Fresnay Glacier was clearly discernible. It was evident at once that we had much exaggerated the inclination of the arête, and if there should be no unexpected difficulties towards the base of the couloir, success was not yet out of the question.'

After descending with difficulty to the Frêne glacier and crossing the plateau the party negotiated the bergschrund and 'arrived at some easy broken-up rocks on the west of the couloir, up which our progress was rapid; but this did not last long. We were obliged to exchange those pleasant rocks for the snow and hard ice of the couloir, and for the next 5 hours, with the exception of about 15 minutes of rock-climbing, every step had to be won with the ice-axe.

'At 8.5 we reached the arête about half way between the Aiguille Blanche de Péteret and Mont Blanc de Courmayeur; and here at last we could see the whole of the route to be traversed as far as the latter mentioned summit. We had struck the arête at its easiest part. A few yards further on it narrowed, and the inclination increased rapidly, and except where two bosses of rock, one rather more than half way and the other immediately below the summit, broke its continuity, the ridge preserved an almost monotonous uniformity to the very top. Alphonse now came to the front, and had to keep this position as far as the first boss, about  $2\frac{1}{4}$  hours, for we were obliged to go along the crest of the arête, which, although generally quite wide enough for one, was not sufficiently broad to allow us to change position on the rope. We pushed on as fast as possible to the second boss, which we reached at 11.20, and in twenty minutes more gained the summit of Mont Blanc de Courmayeur, getting through the cornice with very little trouble.'

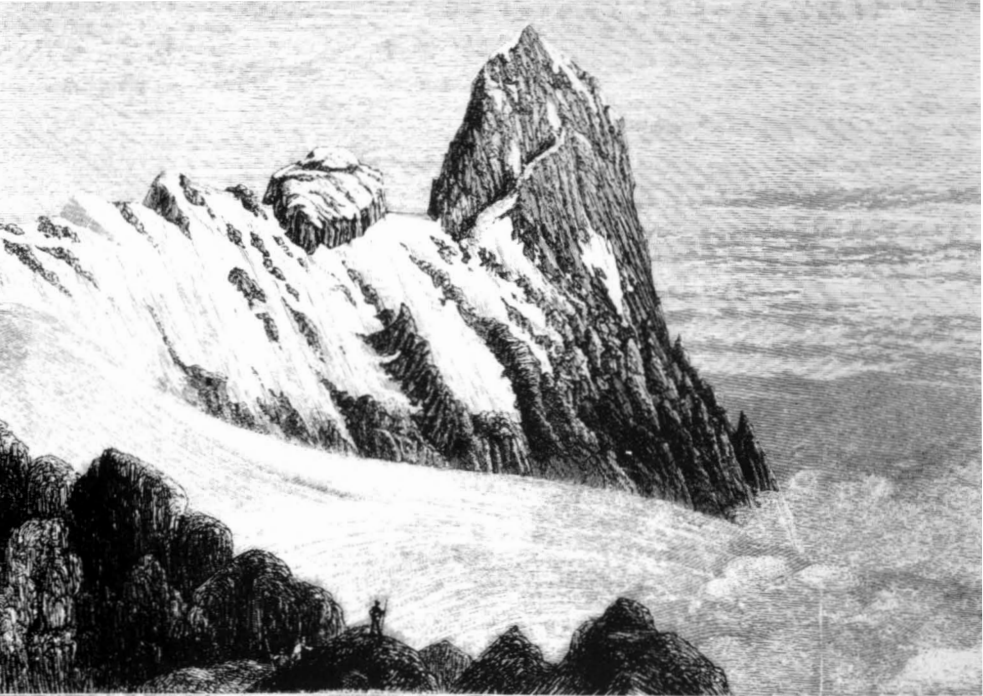
Any route on this side of Mont Blanc is a long and serious undertaking, with no easy line of retreat in the event of bad weather, and the climb was a remarkable achievement for the period.

A few days later, on 5 August 'the track of Mr. Eccles's party on the steep snow-slopes below the precipices of Mont Blanc' was seen by Lord Wentworth who, with Emile Rey and J. B. Bich, reached the summit of the unclimbed Aiguille Noire de Peuterey, the beautiful rock needle which forms part of the lower Peuterey ridge. During an hour spent enjoying the superb panorama Lord Wentworth noticed at 3 yards from the summit 'a mountain rat, which slipped into a cleft of rock as soon as it saw me. Equally close to the summit I gathered some moss with pink and white flowers, then in full blossom. Fifty yards lower I found some ranunculuses, also in flower.' This climb, started on the SE face and continued up the E ridge of the Aiguille, was also a fine exploit for its time.

One of the first to learn of the principal achievement of the season was Coolidge, as he recalled in the following year. 'One bright summer morning in August, 1877, soon after my return from an unusually short holiday among the mountains, a foreign post-card was placed in my hands, which proved to contain the startling news of the conquest of the Meije on the 16th. of that month by Mons. E. Boileau de Castelnau, whom I had met at La Béarde some three weeks previously.'

Since the first ascent of the Pic Central by Coolidge, his aunt Miss Brevoort and 3 guides in June 1870 the slightly higher western peak, or Grand Pic, had been virtually under siege from all sides. An attempt to traverse the ridge connecting the highest points, by H. G. Gotch with Henri Dévouassou and Alexandre Tournier in June 1876, had been unsuccessful, while parties endeavouring to find routes up the Grand Pic itself were forced to retreat.

After bivouacking under the boulder known as the Hôtel du Châtelieret in the Etançons valley to the S of the mountain Boileau de Castelnau set out with Pierre Gaspard, the latter's son Pierre and J. B. Rodier. The successful ascent was made by way of the Promontoire spur and the Glacier Carré. 'The summit was reached at 3pm, and two stonemen built on it. The descent was excessively difficult. J. B. Rodier, who had been left on the way up, was rejoined, but night overtook the party a short distance above the spot where their provisions had been left. The party was obliged to halt on a narrow



90 *The W peak of the Meije from the summit of Le Bec de l'Homme (reproduced from AJ 9)*

ledge of rock, exposed to a violent snow and hail storm.' After this unpleasant experience and some nasty moments during the rest of the descent the party made a safe return to La Bérarde.

Few of the major Alpine peaks are more difficult than the Meije. All the routes, like those on the Aiguille Verte, are serious undertakings demanding considerable experience of high mountains. The first ascent of the Grand Pic is rightly remembered as one of the great feats in Alpine climbing history.

In the Pennine Alps the summit of the Ober Gabelhorn was reached by a new route on 3 September when J. W. Hartley and W. E. Davidson, with Peter Rubi and Johann Jaun, made the first ascent of the SE ridge. 'Crossing the Gabelhorn glacier, they made straight for a well-defined snow col, at the foot of the final peak, on the S.E. arête and from this point they followed the arête, keeping either upon it or on its eastern face, but close to the actual ridge, until the lower of the two summits, distinctly seen from the route to the Triftjoch, was reached. A short snow arête brought the party to the foot of the final peak, the rocks forming which were steep but not difficult, and the top was reached at 10.40.'

Three days later, while Hartley, Davidson and H. Seymour Hoare, with Rubi, Jaun and Aloys Pollinger, were climbing the Weisshorn by a dangerous route up the SE face and the final section of the SW ridge or Schaligrat, a major accident occurred on the E ridge of the Lyskamm. On 6 September all the members of a party consisting of W. A. Lewis and Noel H. Paterson, with Niklaus, Johann and Peter Joseph Knubel, were killed when a cornice on the ridge some 500 feet below the summit gave way. Hartley, who with Davidson and others led the recovery party, wrote that 'the cornice had broken away in



*91 Upper Fresney ice-field and Peuterey approach (Photo: C. Douglas Milner)*

two places, leaving some 10 feet in the middle still adhering to the mountain. The length of the parts which broke away was, perhaps, 40 feet on each side of the remaining portion.' Commenting on the accident in the *Alpine Journal* Freshfield, the editor, wrote that there need be 'no hesitation in pressing on all climbers, guides or amateurs, the lesson of this lamentable disaster. The danger is no new or unfrequent one; snow cornices have been and always must be encountered in the most prudent mountaineering. This is not the first, though the most impressive, warning of their peril.' As a result of the accident the frontier ridge over the Lyskamm became one of the most feared routes in the Zermatt region for many years.

The final notable climb of the season took place in the Bernina Alps where on 13 September Paul Güssfeldt, with Hans Grass and Caspar Capat, made the first ascent of Piz Scerscen. Any route on the Scerscen is a serious proposition and it is recognized as one of the more difficult peaks in the Alps.

In conclusion, the present writer recently had occasion to recall, while admiring the panorama from the summit of the Aiguille de Rochefort, one of the more unusual expeditions which took place one hundred years ago. Lord Wentworth and Signor G. de Filippi, accompanied by a number of guides and porters, made an attempt 'to get to the top of the Dent du Géant by means of rockets. On the north of the Dent, only 80 mètres below the summit, is a platform of rock, and on the opposite flank, at a somewhat lower level, a corresponding one. The object was to pass a rope over the summit from platform to platform by means of rockets. A mechanism had been prepared for this purpose by Signor Bertinetti, of Turin. At the third attempt success seemed about to crown the plan, the party on the north side saw the rocket stick fall at their feet, but a gust of wind carried back the rope, and all subsequent attempts were equally unsuccessful. The Dent du Géant still remains unconquered. Whether or not it is allowable to use such weapons against a peak, proved inaccessible by all ordinary means, is a nice question of mountaineering morals on which we do not feel called to express any opinion.'

Although the enterprise did not succeed it must have been great fun.

## Events and Trends 1974-6 The Andes

Evelio Echevarría

The main trend in Andean climbing in the last 3 years has been the increasing preference for new, technical routes at the expense, it is to be assumed, of exploratory mountaineering. It can also be said that on the average, expeditions seem to be diminishing in size, while at the same time undertaking more and more difficult propositions. As before, interest in the Northern Andes has been moderate, and Peru and Patagonia seem to continue to draw the greater part of the activity.