Just as we reached the hut once again the advance guard of the rescue team arrived, carrying an enormous searchlight. Understandably, they seemed rather disappointed that the perfect occasion on which to use it and the dogs to good effect had been missed by an hour or so; but they generously conceded that that hour might have been the one that mattered. And so said the doctor in Fort William on that same Sunday afternoon, as he declared his patient to be recovered from exposure, and suffering only from a bruise inflicted by an over enthusiastic iceaxe.

No doubt there were many morals to be drawn, but there are 2 main things that I shall always associate with that night. First, as the rescue team said, it is *always* worth going to search if you can get there first, even though you may make it a bit harder for the dogs: 12 hours or so beneath the snow may leave all but the memory unmarked, but the 13th may be the killer. Second, if you get into a similar fix as casualty or rescuer, remember that there is more hope of a miracle than you will be inclined to believe—because hope is itself a useful commodity.

And perhaps a third lesson should be added, though I like to think that I knew it already: even 'easy' slopes can be lethal when covered with new wet snow, and should be avoided however desperate you are for a climb.

The life and writings of Ramond

Kev Reynolds

The transition to an appreciation of mountains as places of beauty, rather than hostile obstacles to trade and communication, was a protracted course. The heralds of enlightenment—Gesner, von Haller, and Rousseau—glow as candles in the dim corridors of fear and superstition, yet their eulogies were inspired principally by the 'middle view', as Ruskin's were likewise restricted a century and more later. One of the earliest men of letters to venture into the realms of eternal snow and ice and, furthermore, illumine the darkness of ignorance with an honest and elegant prose, was that worthy successor to de Saussure, Ramond de Carbonnières (1755-1827).

On his first visit to high mountains he responded to the uncharted wastes of snowfield and glacier with conscious fascination. 'Where is the source of their secret charm?' he wrote. 'What is the strange, deep, irresistable feeling that draws me to those realms over which my fellow men have never established their domain?'

Louis-François Ramond de Carbonnières was born in Colmar among the lovely hills of Alsace, and as a student at the University of Strasbourg came under the influence of Goethe—also studying at Strasbourg, and some 6 years his senior. He harboured early literary ambitions, published a few poems, a romantic novel and a morbid play; but it was not until he visited the Swiss Alps in 1777—in an effort to escape the traumas of an unhappy love affair—that he found fresh inspiration to enrich the labours of his pen. His excursions above the snow-line were modest—it was not until later that his mountaineering career adopted a more adventurous spirit—but these tentative explorations opened his eyes to undreamed panoramas, he witnessed scenes of solitude that few had ever known, and recorded the visions, and his own reactions to them, in vivid terms.

'Not far away the glacier runs like a narrow strait with mountains on either hand. Further away it is a vast sea from which a few half-submerged summits raise their heads. In the highest regions this sea is calm and shows only the broad furrows of a mighty swell. But where it finds an outlet through a narrow valley, it becomes a furious torrent, whose hurrying waves press one upon another. Everything in such a scene suggests noise and movement; yet not a sound or movement breaks the silence.'

It is this silence, this apparently lifeless quality of a world from whose sterile boundaries sound has been erased, that breeds a contemplative frame of mind.

'The silence of these regions where nothing lives, where nothing moves, which are out of reach of the inhabited world ... contributes to deepen one's meditations and impart to them those sombre hues, that sublime note which they acquire when the soul hovers over the abyss of time.'

The amateur geologist—for none could at that time admit openly to the folly of climbing mountains simply for the fun of it—absorbs the scene with the eye of an artist, then explains the industry of peak and glacier in an eloquent and lyrical fashion.

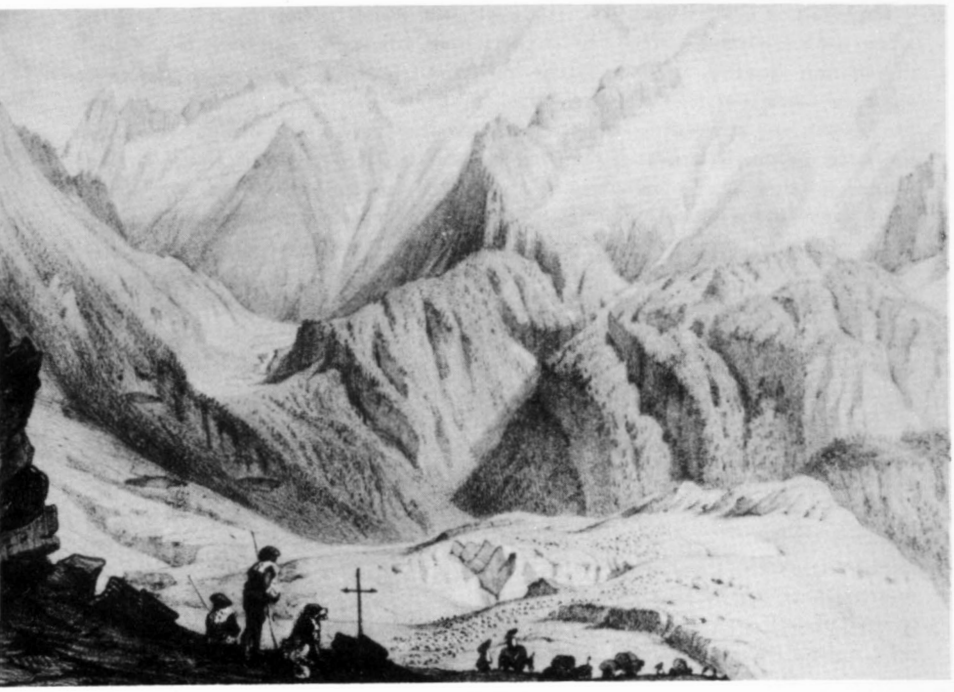
'If, at long intervals, an avalanche falls amid its precipices or a rock rolls down on to the ice, it is an isolated sound; no answering cry of terror comes from any living creature, no flock of birds will start away in panic flight; the tortuous mazes of the mountains, under their muffling coverlet of snow, will silently receive the sound and none will follow. Will any who is not a careful observer of Nature and her ways believe that in this vast tomb she has her workshop, and that here, like the thoughtful monarch who, in the quietest corner of his palace works out his people's happiness, our earth mother prepares in this abode of hers, unapproachable save by ways of terror, the flowers she plans to sow for us upon the plains.'

Upon his return from the Alps, cured of his former melancholy, Ramond turned his attention to the translation into French of Archdeacon Coxe's *'Letters on the Civil and Political State of Switzerland.* It was a masterly translation, punctuated with numerous annotations, influenced by his new-found passion for the heights. It earned him the first springs of literary achievement, and led to an introduction to the Cardinal Rohan who offered him the position of Confidential Secretary. It was to prove an exacting and demanding appointment, not without its dangers, for the Revolution was rumbling and many heads were to fall.

In 1787 Ramond visited the Pyrenees and embarked upon a journey of exploration among the highest peaks and wildest valleys of the range. It was a remarkable pioneering achievement in many ways, and wherever he scrambled his eyes were alert to the upland wastes, the play of the clouds and the delicate blossoms of numerous alpine plants. The results of his travels were recorded with peculiar charm in *'Observations faites dans les Pyrénées'*, a book filled with passages of vivid intensity.

'...as we ascended the Penna Blanca, we beheld the enormous mass of the surrounding mountains unfolding itself; but in a short time all our attention was taken up by a very majestic summit which rose from the chaos behind us. From the heights of the rock, this summit may be seen in all its grandeur, covered with eternal snows, surrounded with large bands of ice, and overtopping everything. It is the Maladetta; a mountain reputed inaccessible.'

Trapped above the snowline by a sudden storm with a meagre slab of rock his only shelter, Ramond revels in the fury, dreaming of building a hut there in order to observe better the convulsions of nature's world.



67 Maladetta massif (Photo: K. Reynolds collection)

> 'What a spectacle it would be, when the storms of autumn descended upon the place, as though it were their own peculiar domain; when the fleet izard and the mournful crow, sole dwellers in this wilderness, had fled before them from the heights; when the light and powdery snow, falling from slope to slope, and blown from rock to rock, had swamped the whole waste beneath its capricious billows; when the mountain peaks, wrapped in impenetrable mist, had disappeared from view! What battles then! What whirlwinds!... And what a stillness when the skies no longer thundered, and winter, victorious at last, had no more battles to fight.'

Ramond had become embroiled in politics; he was a gifted amateur botanist and an enquiring geologist. Later he was to become a Prefect at Puy de Dome under the express order of Napoleon, but it is for his mountaineering explorations, and his mountain writing, that he is remembered best. It has been suggested that he climbed only at the justification of science, yet his writings would refute this; scientific knowledge was but a portion of the reward for the hardships endured among mountains; he wrote as Rousseau might have done had he been a mountaineer. His books and journals suggest an involvement and passion, particularly in his early expeditions, not so far removed from that of many alpinists of today. Without restraint he portrayed the emotions experienced whilst climbing, and long before the motives of climbers came under the scrutiny of questioning laymen, Ramond wrote as no single-minded scientist would write:

> 'Such persons as have not traversed mountains of the first order, will with difficulty form an idea of what repays the dangers which are undergone there. Still less will they be able to imagine that these fatigues are not without their pleasures, and these dangers not without their charms.'

He returned again to the Pyrenees in 1792 to escape the terrors of life in Paris where the Revolution—which he had prophesied, and even welcomed—had gained momentum. But even in the apparent sanctity of Gavarnie's sheltering mountains, where he shared not only the coarse bread of the peasants, but their hard and simple life too, the long arm of Revolution reached out and found him, and he was interned for some months in prison. Upon release he turned once more to the mountain fastnesses where he climbed whenever the opportunity presented itself. Among his excursions was an abortive attempt on the Pic de Neouvielle which failed through faulty route-finding and resulted in the party reaching a minor summit. Separated from the main peak by a steep slope of snow-covered scree, Ramond and his guide propelled themselves into the tracks of avalanches in a delightful glissade, leaning on their sticks. Several times more he scrambled on the Pic du Midi de Bigorre, but apparently his favourite outing was to the insignificant Pene du Lieris, a mountain which presented ample opportunities for botanizing.

His knowledge of the range grew with the years, and as it did so his faith in the maps decreased until, in evident frustration, he wrote in his journal: 'May Heaven preserve the Pyrenees from an earthquake big enough to make the map correct!'

In historical terms Ramond's mountaineering fame rests on the distinction of pioneering Monte Perdido's first ascent, in 1802. His was the inspiration, but the ascent was accomplished by others on his behalf. He had seen the 'lost mountain' on numerous occasions from afar, and in the summer of 1797 he organised 2 expeditions to attempt to climb it. On the first of these he camped with his party in the pastures of the Cirque d'Estaube, and the following morning began the harrowing ascent of the icy couloir which leads to the Brèche de Tuquerouye. The ice was so hard that his 'cramping irons' would not bite, and the iron points of his alpenstock made little impression.

> 'It was like ascending a ladder of ice. There was no possibility of zig-zagging, and so mitigating the steepness of the gradient. The angle of inclination continually increased, and the precipice continually grew more profound.'

68 NE face of Monte Perdido (Photo: K. Reynolds)

The ascent of this couloir took 2 hours—but on his second attempt the ice was even more treacherous and 5 hours were required to reach the Brèche. Here his writing becomes animated; the anticipation with which Ramond and his companions are spurred enlivens the account so that today we can share in the moment of triumph when they breach the preliminary ridge and become dazzled with the radiance of Monte Perdido's great iceclad N face.

'We gathered up all our remaining strength ... At each step that we took, we saw the distance lessening. The breach which had long been hidden from us by the edge of the glacier, reappeared in gigantic proportions, and already we felt the cold wind which rushed through the great opening. We hastened on, we rushed forward, and, out of breath, we reached the desired point. An exclamation of delight was uttered by all; but a deep silence succeeded at the sight of a new world ... a frightful and yet sublime spectacle by which our senses seemed overpowered.'

Perdido—or Mont Perdu—dominated the scene. It rose in an enormous block towering before them and separated from the Tuquerouye by a snow-and-ice-filled basin in which lay the glacial tarn now known as the Lago Helado de Marmoré. The view from the Brèche is still dramatic and one of the most remarkable in the Pyrenees, but the glaciers have receded considerably in the past 100 years or so, and the impression which Ramond gained when confronted by such an awesome spectacle is understandable.

'Cut out by the same scissors which have fashioned the flights of the Marboré, it presents a succession of steps sometimes draped in snow, sometimes covered with glaciers which at times overflow and pour themselves one over the other in large and motionless cascades, even to the borders of a lake, of which the surface, still frozen, but freed from the snows, shone with a quiet brightness which heightened the dazzling whiteness of its banks.

'This lake, the desolate area in which it reposed, the mass of ice which bounded it on the south, the black walls which surmount it, the Cylindre and Mont Perdu towering up into the stormy sky, and that rocky, naked, and rugged enclosure, from one of the battlements of which we were contemplating the most imposing and frightful scene in the Pyrenees; all and everything defied comparison.'

Shortly after the attempt ended, and a second expedition the following month likewise failed, Ramond went away, turning his back on the mountains to pursue his career among learned men in dusty rooms well away from the heights where izard roamed free. He had no opportunity to return until 1802. Monte Perdido remained aloof, but his energies and ambition were no longer sufficient to be reined to arduous, and possibly unproductive, explorations. As a compromise he secured the services of 2 local men, Rondau and Laurens, to reconnoitre a route on his behalf. On the slopes of Perdido they teamed with a Spanish shepherd and actually completed the ascent, returning with Ramond a few days later. It was the culmination of his mountain career; the days of freedom and of limitless horizons were ending, and the years which remained never successfully replaced the joys he had found among the savage heights.

'What is civilization,' he wrote, 'if it still leaves in our hearts an imperishable regret for our old independence? What is society if man, who she has fashioned to her will, and attached to her by habit and necessity, cannot escape an instant from the crowd which constrains him without shedding a tear at the thought of the necessity which plunges him back into it?'