

# Treasures of the Alpine Club

## Rare Books and Pictures

Peter Bicknell

The Alpine Club's collections of books, periodicals, expedition reports, manuscripts, pamphlets, offprints and maps, cover, probably better than any other library in the world, the history and topography of mountaineering and mountain exploration. The first volume of the Library Catalogue which was published in 1981 lists nearly 20,000 books and periodicals. Work is now proceeding on cataloguing the thousands of papers which make up the rest of the Club's holding.

Although most members appreciate the potential of the library for research, for expedition planning and for studying and enjoying mountain literature, few are aware of the wealth of treasure which lies unnoticed in the library or hidden in the Aladdin's cave of the basement. It was to give members an opportunity of seeing some of this treasure and to celebrate the launching of the first volume of the Catalogue that an exhibition was arranged in the Gallery in December 1981. Those who saw it found it a revelation, and certainly those who arranged it were fascinated by the richness of the material upon which they could draw. As only a limited number of members and guests were able to see it, it is fortunate that we were able to put on a second version of the exhibition at the time of the AGM in 1982; with time to produce a catalogue.

In the exhibition we made no effort to illustrate the more familiar aspects of the library or to show a comprehensive collection of pictures. The exhibits were limited to a selection from a few areas in which the Club is particularly rich. The books in the display cases were limited to volumes published before the foundation of the Club. Indeed we were able to show a group of 7 books published in the 16th century. The earliest of these was the extremely rare *La totale et vraie description de tous les passages, lieux et destroictz, par lesquelz on peut passer et entrer des Gaules es Ytalies*, by Jaques Signot, published in Paris in 1518. This gives a systematic account of the alpine passes leading from France to Italy. It contains a folding map of Italy on which nine passes are named. All that is known of Signot, apart from this book, is that he crossed the alps himself in 1494-5 accompanying Charles VIII to Naples, 4 years or so before Christopher Columbus set foot on the mainland of America. The 2 earliest editions of Josias Simler's *Vallesiae Descriptio*, published in Latin and German in 1574 (both of which were shown) are the first descriptions of Canton Valais. They give practical advice on precautions to be taken above the snowline, including the use of the rope to prevent



32 Dent Blanche and Dent Perroc—H. G. Willink, 1880, watercolour

falling into a crevasse.

Mountaineering in the late 18th and the first half of the 19th centuries was dominated by Mont Blanc. The history of the early attempts, the first successful ascent and its repetitions is richly chronicled, and is generously represented in the Club's collections. We were able to show a selection of the classic books of de Saussure and Bourrit, the two pioneers who were largely responsible for the eventual conquest of the mountain. De Saussure took a keen interest in scientific instruments, inventing the magnetometer, diaphanometer, anemometer and cyanometer. Amongst the apparatus which he took to the summit of Mont Blanc on 3 August 1787, was a beautiful little silver pocket compass and sundial, which is one of the Club's most precious possessions.<sup>1</sup> Two of Grundmann's well known but engaging prints of de Saussure's caravan on Mont Blanc gave some idea of the paraphernalia which was carried, including a generous supply of bottles of wine. Neither Balmat nor Paccard published an account of their first ascent on 8 August 1786. However we were able to show Paccard's manuscript diary open at a summary of ascents of Mont Blanc, including his own, together with the chart of colours which he took with him on the successful expedition. This is a sheet of drawing paper on which bands of watercolour in various shades of blue were used to test the colour of the sky at various altitudes. It seems to be related to de Saussure's cyanometer. Although Balmat left no written account, 46 years after the event he dictated one to Alexandre Dumas, who later published an inaccurate and colourful version. As Balmat was not scrupulously honest in his desire to belittle the achievement of Paccard and to enhance his own, it seems appropriate that he should have been represented by a document containing a charge against him in 1829 for smuggling tobacco.

From the many Mont Blanc manuscripts available we selected Mark Beaufoy's narrative of his first ascent by an Englishman on 9 August 1787, and a letter written from the summit on 25 July 1827, by William Hawes to his brother Benjamin. The first canine ascent was celebrated by a plate from Henry Martin Atkins' *Ascent to the Summit of Mont Blanc, on 22 and 23 August, 1837*, showing Balmat's dog on the highest point in Europe. Atkins at the age of 19 was the youngest climber to reach the summit, and the volume displayed is a family copy, containing some interesting letters from his uncle. A book which, with its lively illustrations by the author, did much to popularise Mont Blanc was John Auldjo's *Narrative of an ascent to the Summit of Mont Blanc on 8 and 9 August, 1827*. Thanks to the generosity of our American Honorary Member, Monroe Thorington, the Club owns a splendid collection of items associated with Auldjo. Auldjo was a talented watercolour artist and his 'Passage of a block of ice in a Crevisse', quite apart from the fascinating character of the subject, is a beautiful picture, beautifully executed. It was the original sketch for one of the six 'Perilous Situations' illustrated



33 *The Lyskamm from the Gornergrat—Ruskin, 1849, watercolour*



34 *Le Grande Theatre des Ales et Glaciers—1785. One of 28 aquatints from Vues Remarquables des Montagnes de la Suisse.*

in the book. Perhaps the most remarkable of the six is the one which depicts a large party breakfasting on a perilously insecure snow bridge. Another plate illustrates the same view after the bridge had collapsed. The collection enabled us to compare several of the original drawings with illustrations in the book. Auldjo's interest in botany was shown by some specimens of alpine flowers collected and mounted by him.

The vogue for the ascent of Mont Blanc was profitably exploited by Albert Smith in his writings, his lectures and above all in the entertainment which in 1852 he staged at the Egyptian Hall, Piccadilly. This was a prodigious success; it ran for 8 years, was attended by the Prince Consort and the Prince of Wales, was performed at Osborne for the Queen and at Windsor for King Leopold of Belgium, and earned at least £30,000 for 'Mont Blanc' Smith. Among our exhibits were Albert Smith's Mont Blanc fan, decorated on one side with the programme of the Egyptian Hall show and on the other with views from the Mont Blanc Handbook; the score of 'The Echo of Mont Blanc, Polka', displaying a portrait of Albert Smith; and 'The New Game of Mont Blanc', a 'Snakes and Ladders' type of game where players starting from the Egyptian Hall and spinning a tee-to-tum, advance, provided they avoid the morgue, by uneasy stages to the Summit of Mont Blanc.

The pleasures and interest which mountaineers have, over the years, derived from the flowers which they associate with their expeditions are reflected in a strong botanical section in the library, which was represented by a few outstanding books. The earliest was Conrad von Gesner's *De Raris et Admirandis Herbis* of 1555. Gesner, whom Hallam describes as 'endowed with a mind capable of omniferous erudition', also wrote a *Catalogue of Plants*, 1542, and *Bibliotheca Universalis*, 1551-1558, which is nothing less than a catalogue of all the writers who have ever lived, with their works, written in Hebrew, Greek and Latin. A posthumous folio edition of Albrecht von Haller's *Icones Plantarum Helvetiae*, 1795, with splendid engraved plates was displayed. Perhaps the most beautiful illustrations shown were the little lithographs in the 8 volumes of Johan Hegetschweiler's *Sammlung von Schweizer Pflanzen*, 1826-1834. These were exquisitely drawn on stone by Jonas David Labram and lovingly coloured by his daughter Louise. The most splendid of the flower books was Sir Joseph Dalton Hooker's *Illustrations of Himalayan Plants*, 1855, a large folio volume illustrated with dazzling coloured lithographs, prepared and executed by W. A. Fitch from drawings collected by Hooker's friend J. F. Cathcart. Hooker, a friend and champion of Darwin, who accompanied Sir James Ross to the Arctic and made several expeditions in the Himalayas, was a member of the A.C. He is perhaps best known as Director of Kew Gardens, President of the Royal Society and for editing and revising the standard *Handbook of British Flora*, generally known as 'Bentham and Hooker'.

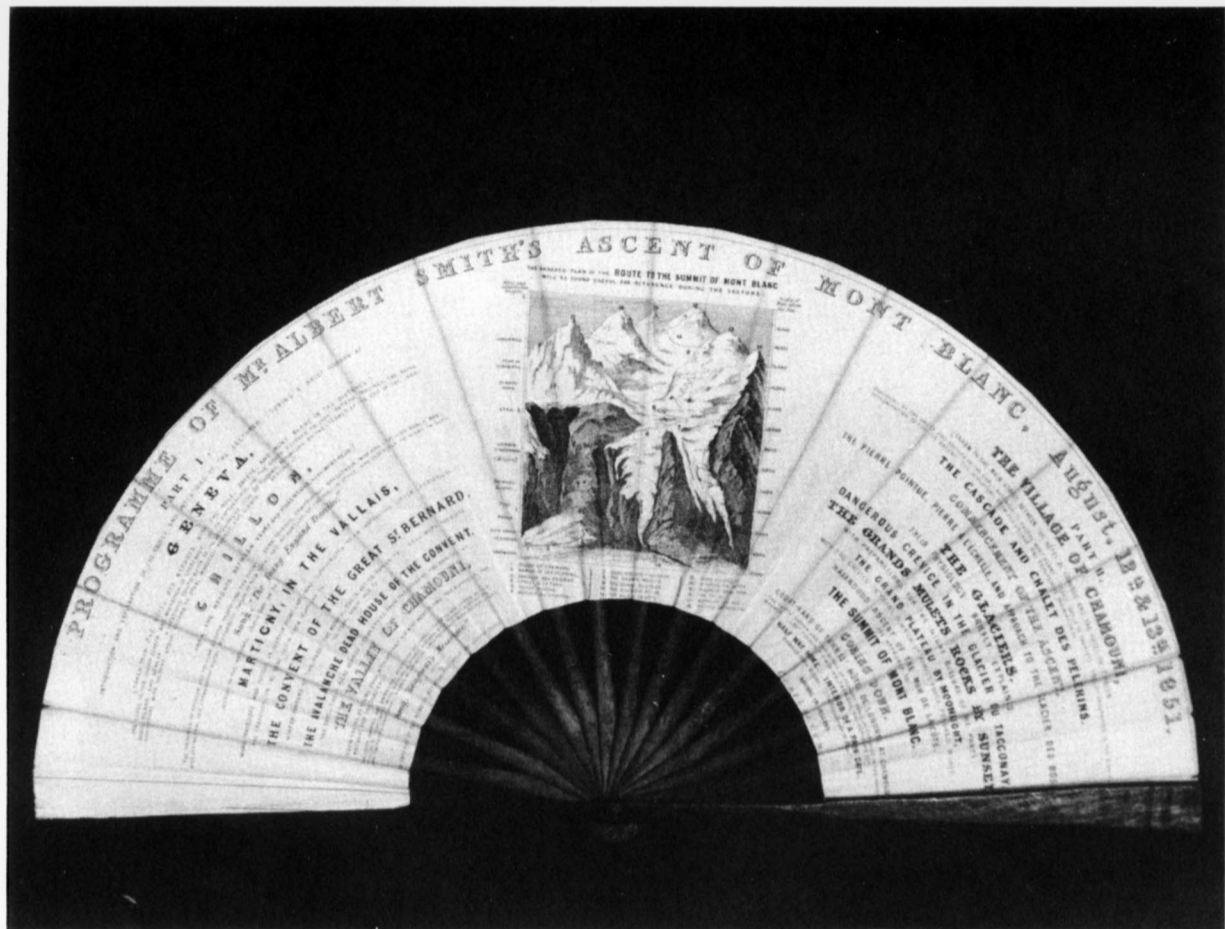
Books about the British Isles chosen for exhibition were all published before 1840. They cover the period of Picturesque Travel, when visitors



35 NE Arête, Pic Oriental, Mège—E. T. Compton, 1896

were more interested in seeing mountains as elements in a picture rather than in exploring or climbing them. The Rev. William Gilpin was the 'high priest of the picturesque', and his *Observations relative chiefly to Picturesque Beauty made in the year 1772, on . . . the Mountains and Lakes of Cumberland and Westmoreland*, 1786, is not so much an account of his tour as a book of instruction telling the reader the correct way of looking at the scenery. The plate shown in the exhibition demonstrated why certain mountains are incorrect. Saddleback, for instance, 'forms disagreeable lines' and the 'pointed summits of the alps are objects rather of singularity than of beauty'. Six years after Gilpin visited the Lakes, Thomas West published *A Guide to the Lakes: Dedicated to Lovers of Landscape Studies*, 1778, in which he enumerated 'stations' from which a correct picturesque view could, weather permitting, be guaranteed. He also recommended the use of the Claude Lorrain glass. Wordsworth's *Guide* which took over from West was shown in the edition of 1835. It had been originally published in 1810 as an anonymous introduction to a folio volume of *Select Views in Cumberland, Westmoreland, and Lancashire*, by the Rev. Joseph Wilkinson.<sup>2</sup> Wordsworth's view of nature and of the topography of the Lakes departed radically from the picturesque. It was in the *Guide* that he made his prophetic statement about the need to preserve the district as 'a sort of national property'.

The library contains a large number of magnificent books illustrated with coloured plates. Best known to mountaineers are those of the Swiss topographical artists, Gabriel Lory, father and son. Their *Voyage Pittoresque aux Glaciers de Chamouni*, 1815, which includes views of Mont Blanc, the Mer de Glace, the Dru and the other Aiguilles, was chosen for display. The older Lory was the pupil of Johan Caspar Wolff who was responsible for most of the views in the two editions shown of *Vues Remarquables des Montagnes de la Suisse*. The edition of 1776 is illustrated with hand coloured etchings, and that of 1785 with a series of coloured aquatints. British books of this sort were represented by *The Northern Cambrian Mountains, or a Tour through North Wales*, 1820, showing an unusual view in aquatint by T. Compton (not to be confused with the alpine artist E. T. Compton, several of whose works were exhibited) of the prospect looking south from the summit of Snowdon to Cardigan Bay and Cader Idris. Among the coloured plate books 2 spectacular volumes were displayed. One was Sir William Hamilton's *Campi Phlegraei. Observations on the Volcanoes of the Two Sicilies*, 1776, bound with *Supplement to the Campi Phlegraei. Being an account of the Great Eruption of Mount Vesuvius in the month of August 1779*, 1779. The engravings, after gouache drawings by Pietro Fabris, are richly coloured with watercolour, bodycolour and varnish. The scenes of eruptions are particularly lurid. The other was a unique album sumptuously made up of coloured aquatints, mounted and presented with a dedicatory frontispiece and letter to Queen Charlotte by R. Henzy; 19 of the 29 prints are from the *Vues Remarquables*.



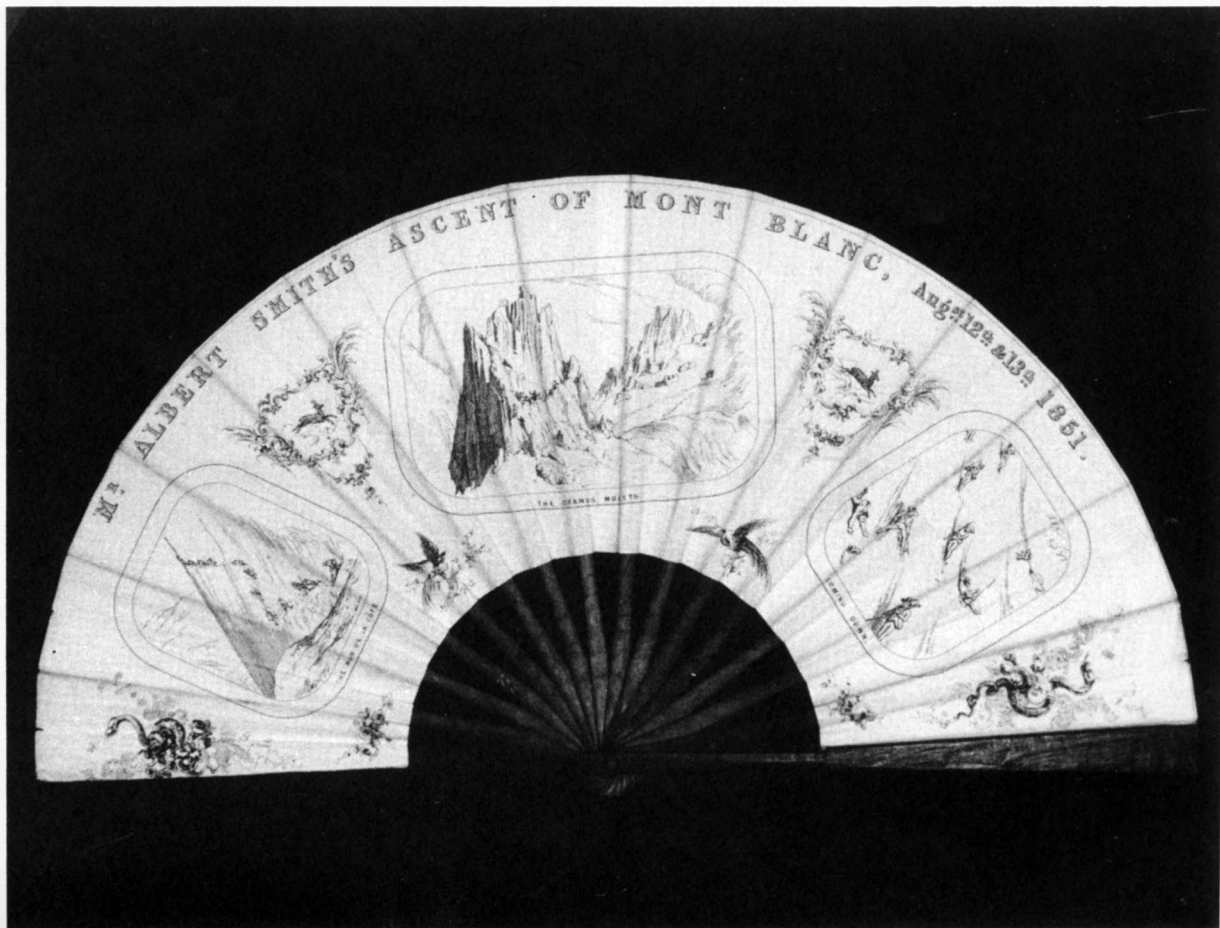
36 Mr Albert Smith's Ascent of Mont Blanc fan; the programme of the Egyptian Hall show

Photo: Frank Solari

One of the most difficult areas of choice was in our vast holding of manuscript material. Apart from papers related to Mont Blanc, the selection was somewhat arbitrary. A few refer directly to the Matterhorn disaster of 1865, including Whymper's note to his friend the Rev. John M'Cormick written on his return to Zermatt the day after the accident, and a letter from A. G. Girdlestone, written from Zermatt a day later, describing seeing Whymper and Croz arriving on the summit of the Matterhorn. Four of the many Führerbücher, with particularly interesting entries, were shown. A special place was given to the 2 pencil notes sent to Noel Odell written by George Mallory on Everest on 6 and 7 June 1924, the 2 days before he and Irvine were lost.

About 70 of the Club's pictures were displayed on the walls of the gallery. Many of these were old friends, as for instance, the delightful early 19th century watercolour of the Wetterhorn, previously attributed to Bonington and for the time being unattributed, which normally hangs in the Ante Room; the painting by Trier of the North Face of the Jungfrau from the bottom of the Library stairs; and several of the works of Elijah Walton and Howard Somervell. However, many of them have only recently been acquired or raised from the vaults of the Club. Only a few years ago a remarkable series of watercolour and pastel sketches made by Somervell on the 1922 Everest expedition were unearthed, dusty and dilapidated, from under a pile of miscellaneous objects in the basement. Thanks to the zeal of the Honorary Keeper of the Pictures, these have all been cleaned and mounted in standard mounts, so that they can, when the occasion demands, be framed. As a record of events now over 60 years old they form a set of the greatest interest. The renaissance of the Club's pictures is almost entirely due to the inspired and tireless work of the Honorary Keeper. Not only does he provide this service, but he provides a ceaseless flow of generous gifts of both pictures and rare books. Members must mostly be quite unaware of all the activity that goes on behind the scenes. Recently for instance we have sent photographs for an exhibition in Nepal; we have provided properties and advice for stage performances at the Edinburgh Festival and the Lyric Studio in London; we have given similar help to a film company; we have received a deputation from Berne to look at our pictures, and we have lent pictures for exhibitions for the Fell and Rock Club and the Abbot Hall Art Gallery, Kendal, quite apart from the helpful answers to enquiries which the officers and the staff are constantly giving to the press, mountaineers outside the Club, research workers and many others.

The most remarkable group of pictures in the exhibition was a collection of six watercolours by John Ruskin,<sup>3</sup> of which the 'Glacier des Boissons' was used as an illustration for the Poems of Ruskin, and 'Crest of La Cote, Chamounix' for Volume IV of *Modern Painters*. His 'Lake of Lucerne and Uri Rotstock' shows the spot referred to by Walter Scott in *Anne of Geierstein* as 'the immortal field of Rutli . . . where our illustrious



37 Mr Albert Smith's Ascent of Mont Blanc fan; scenes from the Mont Blanc Handbook

Photo: Frank Solari

ancestors the Fathers of Swiss independence met'. In each case the relevant book was shown.

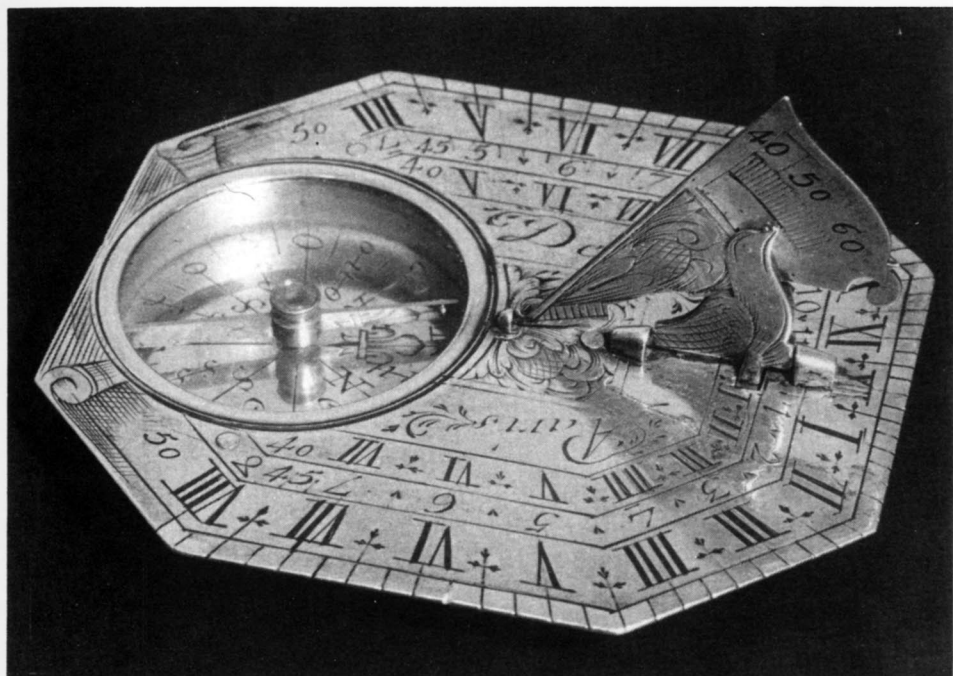
The pictures, unlike the other exhibits, were not chosen to illustrate any particular theme; however there was an emphasis on pictures which were used as illustrations for books, and works by artists who, like two active members of the Club, A. D. McCormick (employed by Sir Martin Conway as companion artist and illustrator of his books) and E. T. Compton worked extensively as illustrators. Wherever possible, the plates in the books, corresponding with the pictures were shown. Whymper, the king of alpine illustrators, was represented by three little watercolours of peaks, very different in character from the dramatic pictures in *Scrambles*. Incidentally the picture in *Scrambles* of 'My tent bearer—the hunchback' was reinforced by the tent itself. Several more of Whymper's Matterhorn illustrations were shown, along with other Matterhorn relics and Gustave Doré's two highly dramatic prints of 'Arrival on the Summit' and 'The Fall' which were published in Paris less than three months after the accident.

While we were arranging the exhibition, the old Pilkington—Willink climbing partnership was recalled by D. T. Pilkington's gift of two characteristic works by H. G. Willink. These are a monochrome drawing of 'Rest after Toyle', prepared as an illustration for Dent's *Mountaineering* in the Badminton Library, and a real treasure in the form of a sketch book recording an alpine and Italian tour in 1880. It contains about 50 delightful watercolour sketches. Thanks to the skilful colour photography of Frank Solari we were able to show a case full of these views as well as the sketch book itself.

At about the same time as we received D. T. Pilkington's gifts, the library received by bequest Dora de Beer's alpine library, a collection which is particularly strong in books about New Zealand. These recent acquisitions have emphasised how much the Club owes to its benefactors. Nearly all the treasures in the exhibition were originally acquired by gift or by bequest and not by purchase. In 1950, on the death of our member Count Alain de Suzannet, the library was greatly enriched by the bequest of the Suzannet collection of alpine literature, which was the source of some of the rarest books in the exhibition. Other precious books came to the Club with the Ladies' Alpine Club. The exhibition will have served a valuable purpose if it encourages members and friends of the Club to continue the tradition of enlightened generosity.

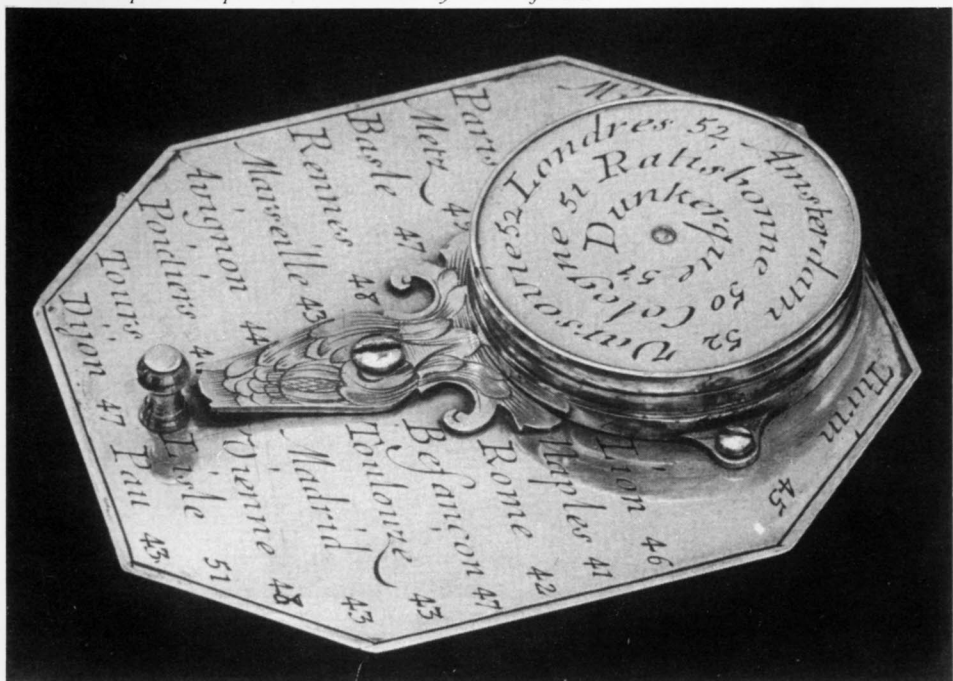
#### Notes

(1) This instrument was made by Delure of Paris. The compass has been offset for a deviation of about 14°. It would therefore have been set correctly for Paris in about 1730, the probable date of its manufacture. It has a Butterfield dial and a typical 'bird' gnomon. The dial can be set for use in different latitudes by adjusting the position of the bird's beak



38 39 Silver pocket compass and sundial made by Delure of Paris

Photos: Frank Solari



against a scale on the moving part of the gnomon. The latitudes of various places in Europe are engraved on the face on the reverse side. This adjustment covers latitudes from 40°-60° N. There are three separate hour scales on the face covering this range of latitude. There is only one similar instrument made by Delure in a museum in the British Isles (The Whipple Science Museum of Cambridge University), possibly three in private collections and a few in museums elsewhere in the world. (Information supplied by Greenwich Observatory.)

(2) The Alpine Club copy of Wilkinson's *Select Views* is of extreme rarity. The first edition was published in 1810, printed by Harrison and Rutter, 373 Strand, London. Our copy is a new issue. The text and the plates are the same as the edition of 1810, but the title page is different, bearing the imprint, '1817. S. Mills, Printers, Thetford.' No similar copy has been recorded, though the text was reprinted for a second edition, '1821. C. Lloyd, Thetford.'

(3) John Ruskin was elected to the Alpine Club in 1869 in recognition of his contribution to mountain literature on the publication of Volume IV of *Modern Painters*, under the sub-title *Of Mountain Beauty*. He resigned in 1882.

Editor's Note: Copies of the catalogue of the exhibition are still available and can be obtained from the Assistant Secretary at 74 South Audley Street, London W1, price £2 including post and packing.