

One Hundred Years Ago

(with extracts from the *Alpine Journal*)

C. A. Russell

'The new year found us again at Pen-y-gwryd with eighty feet of rope and our trusty axes.'

One of the first parties to complete a climb of note in 1883 was that of T. W. Wall and A. H. Stocker who in January made the first ascent of the W buttress of Lliwedd. In a note to the Editor of the *Alpine Journal* Wall recalled that a year earlier an attempt from the foot of the Central Gully had ended in failure and that a postcard had been left with Owen, the landlord of the Pen-y-Gwryd Hotel, 'which we asked him to send us in case anyone succeeded in ascending the northern cliffs'. The postcard did not arrive and on their return they were delighted to learn that Lliwedd was still unclimbed.

'On January 4, after carefully observing the rocks of the buttress to the west of the central couloir, we came to the conclusion that it might be possible to cross the face in an upward direction from east to west, and then strike straight up. At 11.15am we got on the rocks, beginning from the lower of two dark green patches seen from below'.

A difficult section involving a rock wall was overcome and they arrived at a ledge 'about six inches wide and four yards long; the rock above was nearly perpendicular, with no handhold, and there was nothing below. It was the only way; we could not turn it, and somehow we got over, but we neither of us wish to be there again. From that ever to be remembered ledge the climbing was grand work up to the point where we had to turn from a westerly direction to go straight up the face'. After negotiating a nasty corner where one of the party nearly slipped, their difficulties were over. 'The rocks grew less and less difficult as we ascended; and, after four hours and a half of incessant work up 850 feet of rocks, we found ourselves on the summit ridge exactly thirteen yards from the cairn'.

The exact line taken by Wall and Stocker has not been accurately ascertained; in the opinion of J. M. Archer Thomson it may have been a variation of the Bilberry Terrace route. Undoubtedly, however, the first ascent of one of the finest cliffs in Wales was an event of some consequence and a fine achievement for the period.

In the Alps enthusiasm for winter climbing continued, although the weather was less settled than that experienced 12 months earlier. During January and February Mrs Elizabeth Burnaby¹, with Edouard Cupelin, made a number of high level expeditions, including the ascent of the



19 Dunagiri SW ridge

Photo: André Roche

Aiguille du Midi from the Montenvers. On 3 March Mrs Burnaby's party, joined by Vittorio Sella and 3 Val Tournanche guides, made an attempt on Monte Rosa from the Theodul hut. Good progress was made but a violent wind and piercing cold forced them to retreat after reaching a point near the Sattel below the Dufourspitze.

At the end of May more agreeable conditions were experienced by F. F. Tuckett and E. T. Compton who, with François Dévouassoud, visited Corsica and made several mountain excursions, including the first British ascent and traverse of Monte Cinto (2706m), the highest peak. After completing the climb by way of a steep snowy couloir and the upper section of the W ridge the party was able to spend an hour on the summit admiring the magnificent panorama. Writing later in the *Alpine Journal* Tuckett noted that 'as a rule, at any rate during the months of May and June, the atmosphere in Corsica is not particularly clear, but on this occasion it was fortunately more so than usual, and not only the greater part of the island but Elba and Monte Cristo were beautifully seen. Portions of the gulfs of Porto and Ajaccio came into the view, and, to my surprise, Calvi and its bay were most conspicuous, proving of course that the actual summit of Monte Cinto is visible from thence, which I had not previously suspected'.

The exceptionally bad weather of the previous year and heavy winter snowfalls resulted in unfavourable conditions throughout the Alps during the early part of the climbing season and it was not until the end of July that the outlook began to improve. In the Bernina Alps 2 new routes to the summit of Piz Gluschaint were completed: the N ridge was climbed on 22 July by Moritz von Kuffner, with Alexander Burgener and Clemenz Perren and the SW ridge on 29 August by T. Curtius, with Christian Klucker and J. Eggenberger. The Curtius party, with the addition of L. Bernus, also made the first ascent, on 27 August, of Piz Bacone in the Bregaglia group. On 26 July W. A. B. Coolidge, with Christian Almer and his second son Christian, made the first ascent of the N ridge of the Croce Rossa in the Graian Alps while, again in the Bregaglia group, the summit of the unclimbed E peak on the Ferro ridge above the Albigna glacier was reached on 28 July by A. and L. V. Bertarelli with G. Rigamonti.

Ten days later J. Stafford Anderson and G. P. Baker, with Ulrich Almer and Aloys Pollinger, made the first ascent of the NW ridge of the Gross Schreckhorn. Addressing the Alpine Club in the following year Anderson recalled that after waiting at Grindelwald for an improvement in the weather Baker had left for a few days' walking and the remaining members of the party had made an unsuccessful attempt on the ridge which had been abandoned on account of a very strong wind. At the first sign of an improvement Anderson telegraphed to Baker, asking him to return at once.

'The following morning was cloudless and the guides were impatient to make another start, but I felt that Baker would appear on the scene

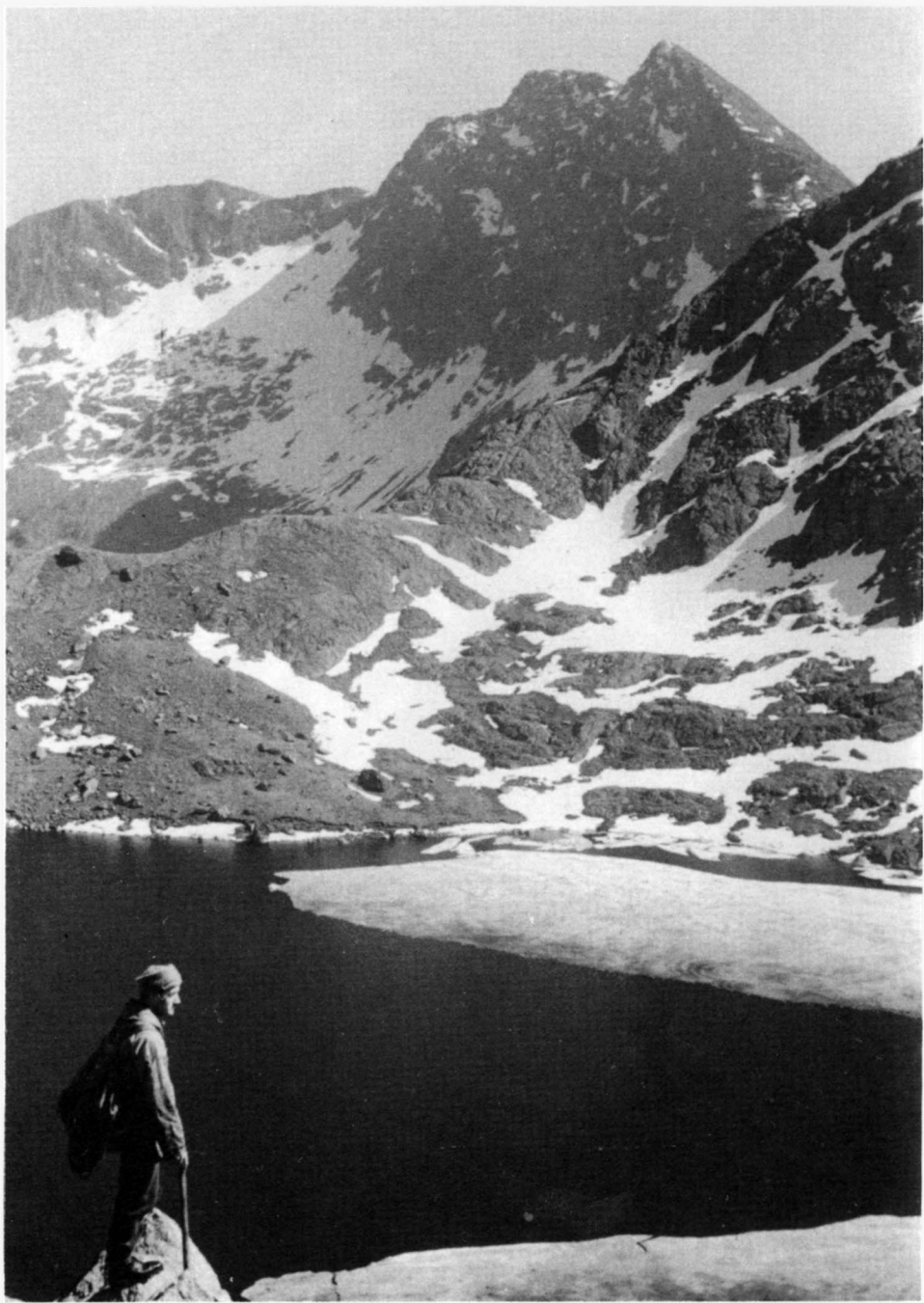


Photo: Douglas Milner

sometime during the afternoon, and that friendship, like the quality of mercy, must not be strained. The day wore on: envy possessed me as party after party filed off for all the peaks and passes in the neighbourhood, leaving myself and guides the only representatives of mountaineering in the place. Still no Baker.' When it was too late to make a start that day Baker arrived, only to say that he had to depart for England to attend a wedding. In the ensuing discussion various suggestions, including the cancellation of the wedding, were considered and finally, after tossing a coin, Baker decided to stay.

On 7 August the party started from the Schwarzegg hut and in misty conditions reached the NW ridge above the Nüssijoch by way of a long couloir—used at that time to reach the upper Schreckfirn plateau—and the W spur of the SW ridge. After Pollinger had succeeded in turning the first big step Almer took the lead and advanced slowly towards the final steep section below the summit. 'A little further on came the steepest part of the whole ascent. It was very much like going up the side of a house, and all that could be seen of the man in front was the soles of his boots. Fortunately the rocks were firm, with plenty of holds, and we slowly but surely wormed our way up them. Ten minutes after, we had left all difficulties behind and were on the snow slopes leading up to the final peak'.

The NW ridge, or Andersongrat, is the most difficult of the Schreckhorn ridges and the first ascent was another fine achievement by this competent party.

Also in the Bernese Alps, on 26 August, Karl Schulz, with Alexander Burgener and J. Rittler reached the summit of the unclimbed Sattelhorn, the peak above the Lötschenlücke and to the W of the Aletschhorn. In the Pennine Alps on 11 August W. E. Utterson-Kelso and 2 English ladies, with Peter Knubel, J. M. Blumenthal and J. P. Zurbrücken, made the first ascent of the S ridge of the Lagginhorn while on 15 and 16 August J. P. Farrar, with Johann Kederbacher, completed the second ascent of the very dangerous W face of the Weisshorn. In the same region H. Seymour King, with Ambros Supersaxo, made the first recorded traverse of the Egginergrat, the fine rock ridge between the Egginer and the Mittaghorn above Saas Fee.

Other routes, both in the Graian Alps, climbed for the first time were the N ridge of the E peak of the Levanna on 11 August, by the Coolidge party, and the W ridge of La Tresenta on 19 August by George Yeld, with Henri Séraphin.

Outside the Alps the principal achievements during the year were those of W. W. Graham's expedition to the Sikkim and Kumaun Himalaya. With Joseph Imboden from St Niklaus, Graham reached Darjeeling in March and after a sleepless night hastened to see the sunrise. 'Suddenly, far away in the dark and yet incredibly high in the sky, a pale rosy pinnacle stole into light. It was the summit of Kangchinjanga. Downwards stole the first glow, tipping the peaks in



21 *Climbing on Lliwedd with Craig yr Aderyn in the background*

Photo: Douglas Milner

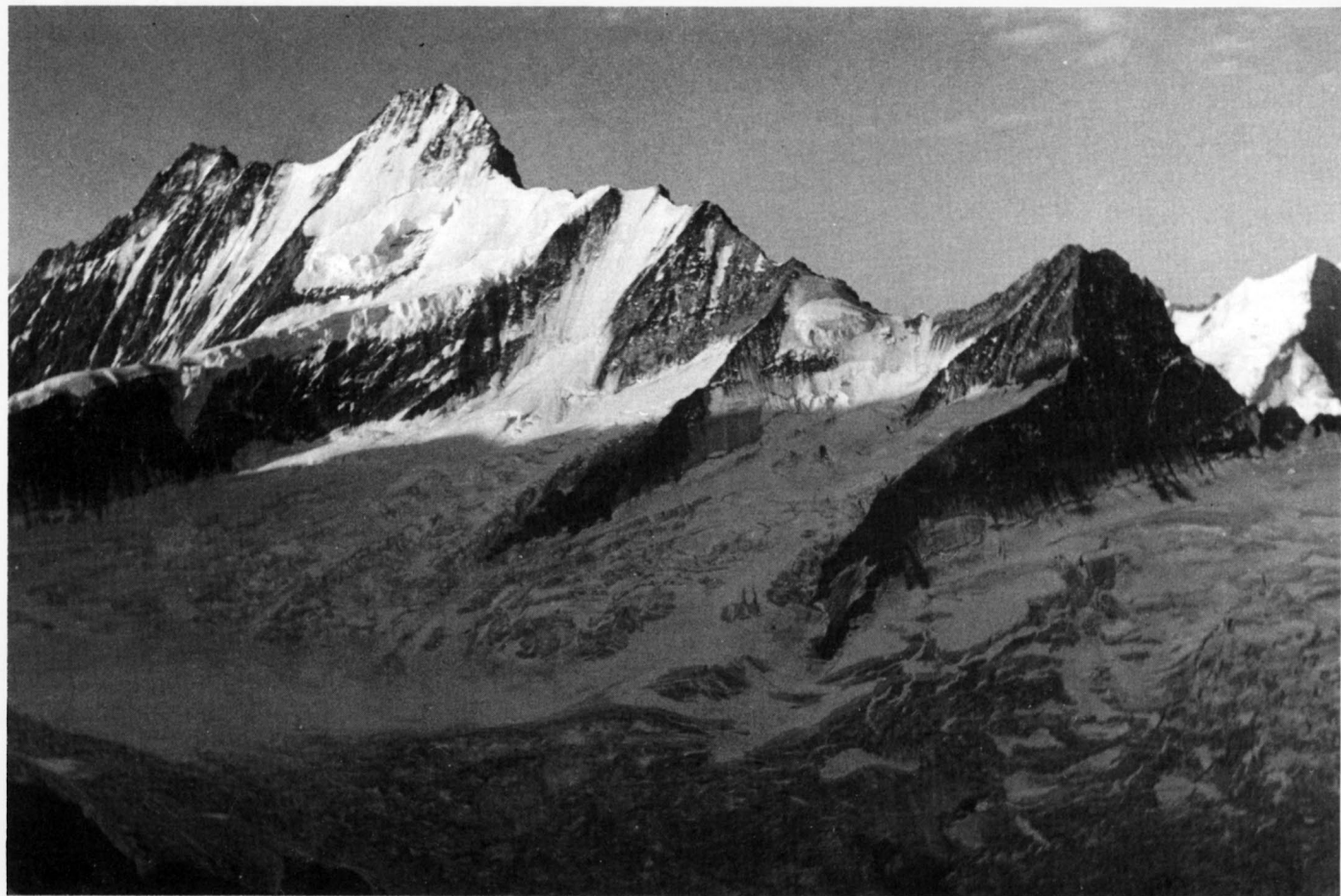
succession with a golden glory; then suddenly it vanished, leaving them cold and grey against the dim sky. Presently followed the true sunlight, and again the summits flashed forth their glories as the sun leaped suddenly above the horizon'. Addressing the Royal Geographical Society in the following year Graham admitted that the peaks to the N looked distinctly more difficult than he had expected. 'Laden with snow more than their wont, owing to the exceptional winter of 1882-83, they still showed out in all their nakedness, high precipices of black or grey gneiss fringed and bordered with broken and overhanging glacier that said as plainly as they could speak, "Thus far and no farther".'

From Dzongri which he reached on 28 March Graham, with Imboden and 3 of the local men he had engaged at Darjeeling, reached the frontier with Nepal at the Singalila ridge by way of the Kang La. On 30 March, with Imboden, he climbed a peak, to the N of the pass, which he estimated to be 'rather over 20,000 feet'. After another expedition from Dzongri during which the party crossed the Guicha La to the Talung glacier they returned to Darjeeling on 10 April, at which point Imboden became ill with fever and had to return to Europe.

Graham was then joined by Emil Boss and Ulrich Kaufmann, who had both been with the Rev. W. S. Green on his expedition to New Zealand in the previous year. Starting from Joshimath in the Garhwal region early in July Graham tried unsuccessfully to penetrate the Rishi Ganga gorge with the intention of attempting Nanda Devi, and then tried to climb Dunagiri (7066m). 'Our route lay up the west ridge, and for some considerable distance we got along very well. Then we were forced away from the edge to the southern side of the arête, and here we suffered much from the great heat and the reverberation of the sun's rays from the snow, which took greater effect from the height we had reached. So much did this trouble us that we were all nearly fainting when we reached the summit of the arête.

Kaufmann, who had been unwell at starting, was quite overcome, and utterly unable to proceed. We did not like to leave him, but he begged us not to turn on his account; and as we thought that we must succeed, we made him comfortable, and started by our two selves. We were now on the final slope of the peak, and, though not abnormal, it was a very steep bit of step-cutting. The mist crept up and snow began to fall, and we were thinking of turning, for we had been two hours from Kaufmann, and it was already one. Suddenly the mist cleared away, and we instantly saw the great height we had reached. We cannot have been less than 22,700, and the summit, not 500ft above us, was in full sight. We again attacked vigorously, Boss just making notches and I enlarging them to steps. But it was no use; down swept the clouds with a biting hail and wind, and we had to turn'.

Graham then returned to Sikkim, where exceptionally bad weather was experienced throughout much of September. Following an improvement at the end of the month the party climbed Jubonu (5936m)



22 *Sunrise on the Schreckhorn*

Photo: Douglas Milner

on 1 October and claimed to have reached the summit of Kabru (7315m) from the SE on 8 October. Six days later they ascended a peak on the Nepalese side of the Kang La before returning to Darjeeling.

From a close study of Graham's account it seems unlikely that, with the exception of the climb on Dunagiri, he reached a height of more than 20,000ft (6096m). His claim to have reached the summit of Kabru has always been open to doubt and it is probable that the party climbed a southern outlier on the SE ridge. Graham was, however, the first British mountaineer to lead a serious expedition to the Himalaya for the purpose of climbing as well as for general exploration. Severely restricted by the weather—conditions were unfavourable for much of the season—he showed great enterprise and his exploits were remarkable for the period.

Two other expeditions are worthy of note. Paul Güssfeldt, during his visit to the Andes, made the first recorded ascent of the extinct volcano Maipo (5288m) on 19 January. He then attempted to climb Aconcagua (6960m) and on 21 February reached an estimated height of 21,520ft (6559m) on the NW face before being driven back by a snowstorm. In N. Europe, on 21 August, a party led by Charles Rabot made the first recorded ascent of Kebnekaise (2123m), the highest peak in Lapland, by way of the W ridge.

In Scotland the Royal Scottish Meteorological Society established an observatory on the summit of Ben Nevis, the building being officially opened on 17 October by Mrs Cameron-Campbell of Monzie, who then owned the mountain. A track to the summit was constructed, a telegraph wire was laid to Fort William and daily readings and weather reports were supplied to the principal newspapers. Much valuable research was conducted at the Observatory, which was to provide welcome hospitality to climbers for many years.

To conclude this account of the events of 100 years ago it seems appropriate to recall the following extract from a paper by Major J. W. A. Mitchell read before the Alpine Club in the previous year and printed in the *AJ* for May 1883. 'Taking everything into consideration, I see no reason why an expedition to the Himalayas, under the auspices of the Alpine Club, should not succeed, even if an attempt were made to scale Kinchinjunga (altitude 28,156ft); one of its southern spurs at any rate seems to present no insuperable obstacles. Anyhow, whether the summit be attained or not, there is no doubt that a very great elevation could be reached, and that we would learn much that is interesting about what at present are unknown mountain altitudes. Irrespective of this, however, a Himalayan tour would be very enjoyable. Let us hope that some of our members will be found enthusiastic enough to try it, and to report at some future time their experiences in that magnificent chain of mountains'.

Notes

(1) Better known as Mrs Aubrey le Blond, the founder of the Ladies' Alpine Club.