

The British, Kugy, and Western Slovenia

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Plates 69–72

The Julian Alps, the Sava valley, the surroundings of the lakes at Bled and Bohinj, Lake Cerknica, the city of Ljubljana and the Postojna caves are areas which the British have been visiting for centuries—first as scientists, later also as travellers and mountaineers, and today mainly as tourists. All these areas are readily accessible by organized motor coach tours which start from Bled, Bohinj and Kranjska gora.

This territory, once part of the multi-national Austrian empire, now is the western part of the republic of Slovenia, one of the six constituent republics of Yugoslavia. The highest mountain in Yugoslavia, Triglav (2863m), lies in Slovenia. Dr Julius Kugy once asked France Avčín, the Slovenian mountaineer, climber and professor of electrical engineering, what part of the Julian Alps he liked the best. Avčín decided on the western Julian Alps, but Kugy demurred; 'That's all right, my dear Avčín, it's beautiful! But the eastern part has the Triglav. The Triglav is not a mountain, the Triglav is a realm.'¹

Forests, mountains, mountain flora, meadows, rivers and lakes are all naturally constituent parts of the globe—but so many prominent Britons have written so much in praise of Slovenia and its people that even the best educated European could hardly fail to take heed and to be flattered. Sir Humphry Davy, and after him Josiah Gilbert and G C Churchill thought that the valley of the Sava river was the most beautiful valley in Europe. Among the last British writers on mountains who 'checked' this statement were H E G Tyndale and Tom Longstaff.

The majority of the British scientists and mountaineers noted that Slovenia is an unusual and somewhat complicated country: the Slovenes are one of the smallest of the Slavic nations, they speak Slovenian, but the majority of them understand at least a little German (or, in the case of today's younger generation, English). Lake Cerknica is in Slovenia, and it is something quite special—an intermittent lake: there are times when one can fish in its waters, and other times when one can hunt wild fowl on its dry bed. And the Sava river, the longest river in Yugoslavia, is not simple either. One of its sources is in Lake Bohinj, and the other origin consists of two sources, far away in another valley near Rateče. In the subterranean caves which the English visited they came upon the proteus, which is an aquatic salamander with special features: it can breathe with gills or with lungs, whichever the situation demands.

The travellers in olden days mostly entered Slovenia over the Podkoren (Wurzen) pass or over the Ljubelj (Loibl) pass—after the Second World War one of them was the humorist George Mikes.² On the Ljubelj pass he first came into contact with the special character of the Yugoslavs, which became even



69 Martuljek Group, Špik and hay-racks.

Photo: Jaka Čop

more apparent as he visited Ljubljana and Belgrade. He came to the conclusion that the Yugoslavs were people who managed whatever the situation. A legacy of the proteus?

Among the first Britons who came to visit the Slovenes for purposes of scientific study was Dr Gualterius Pope. He reported his findings and his impressions of the beauty of the landscape and the mountains in *Acta Philosophica* in 1665. Three years later the Royal Society sent Edward Brown, a doctor of medicine, to the continent. He reached Slovenian soil in 1672, entering over the Ljubelj pass, stopped in Ljubljana and admired the view of the mountains and castles from the top of the Castle Hill. He was most interested in the intermittent Lake Cerknica, in which he fished. Simon Clement, who toured the area in 1715, kept more to the lowlands—he visited Ljubljana and had a look at Lake Cerknica.³ Sir Humphry Davy first came to the area in 1819. He stopped at Podkoren, in Bled, in Radovljica and Ljubljana. There he met a Slovenian girl, 'an Illyrian maid', who nursed him during an illness and whom he mentions gratefully in his diary, in a letter to his brother John dated December 1828 and in his book *Consolations in Travel*, when, like Philaethes, he recalls the Colosseum. Anne Treneer, the author of a biography of Davy, mentions this girl as an innkeeper's daughter named Pepina Dettela.⁴ Lavo Čermelj established that the actual inn was that 'Pri Deteli' in Ljubljana on Nazorjeva Street where the Union Hotel stands today.⁵ Despite the great distance, his weak health and the discomfort of travel in those days, Davy returned to his beloved Sava valley again in 1827 and not long before his death in 1828. This time he was accompanied by John Tobin, a young student of medicine, the son of one of his friends. Tobin was a gifted draughtsman. At Davy's request he sketched settlements and natural peculiarities which they saw. In his diary he noted his own impressions and his delight at the natural phenomena—for instance near Bled the most wonderful rainbow which Davy or he had ever seen. But he also gave vent to his feelings about the bad inns or about how bored he was during the time they spent in small towns such as Ljubljana, where Sir Humphry enjoyed himself fishing or hunting.⁶ Even in 1829, the year of his death, Davy still hoped that he would be able to revisit his favourite places along the Sava river, but death overtook him in Geneva. There is a memorial plaque with texts in Slovenian and in English on the wall of house No. 63 in Podkoren, where Davy stayed several times. In Slovenian it says: 'In this house, SIR HUMPHRY DAVY (b. 1778, d. 1829), the famous naturalist and herald of the beauties of this mountain landscape, stayed several times', and in English: 'BE HIS MEMORY HELD IN HONOUR'.

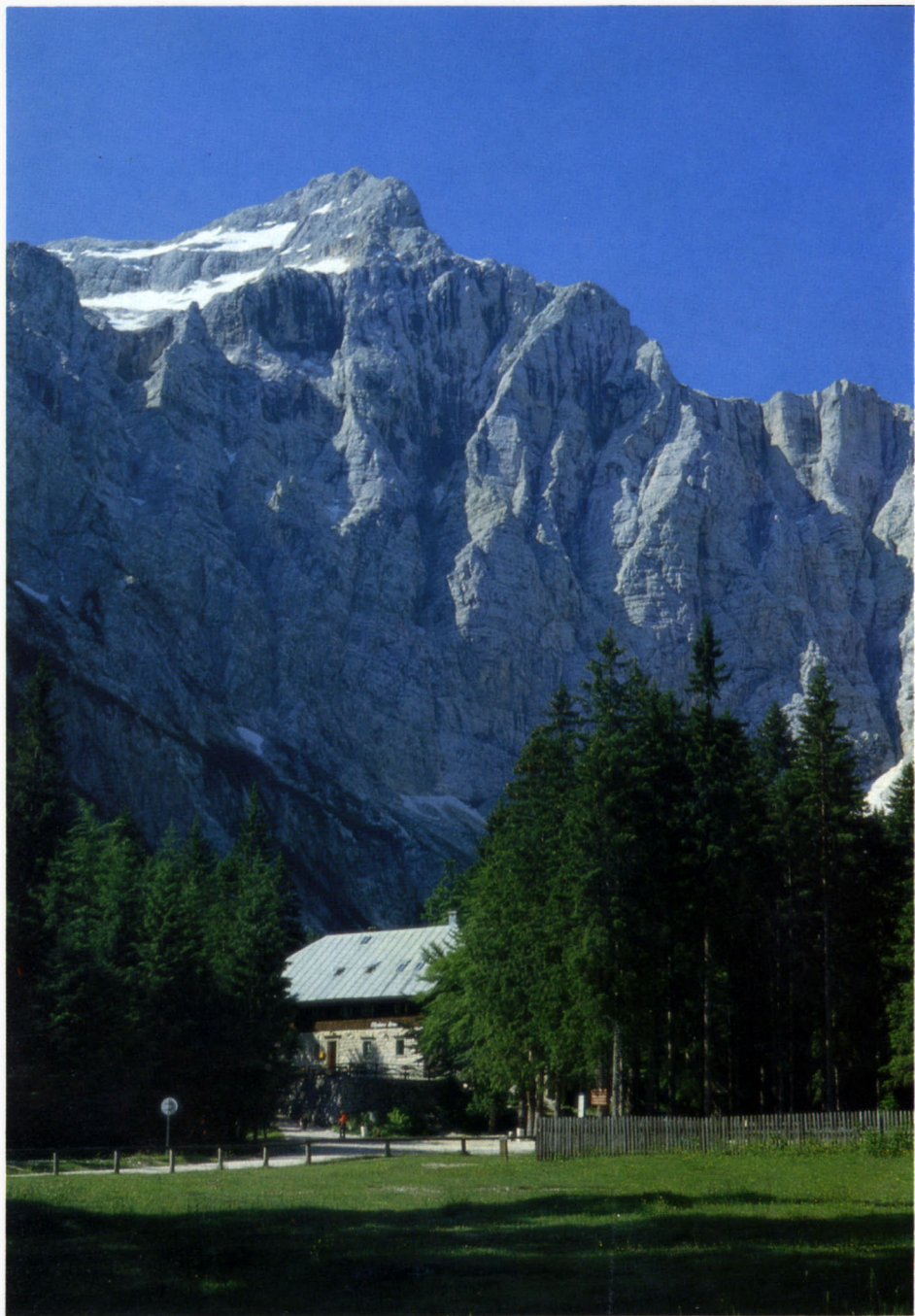
In the years 1861, 1862, and 1863, the painter Josiah Gilbert and G C Churchill, a member of the Geological Society, followed in Sir Humphry's footsteps. They were interested in botany, geology and ethnography; they went on tours of the mountains, visited the place where Davy stayed in Podkoren and confirmed Davy's findings. They presented their impressions in a book entitled *The Dolomite Mountains—Excursions through Tyrol, Carinthia, Carniola & Friuli in 1861, 1862, & 1863*. They were enchanted by the Soča (Isonzo) river, the colours of the sky and the earth at Kranjska gora, the farm houses and, like Davy before them, they felt that people here were happy and enjoyed life.

When they saw the Sava valley in 1861 they admitted: 'Yes, it is the loveliest valley in Europe.'

F F Tuckett from Bristol was in the Triglav area in 1867. Two years later he climbed to the top of Triglav in the company of Eliot Howard, the Swiss guide Christian Lauener and the Slovene guides Jože and Lovrenc Šest. Howard published an account of this achievement, which was not without its complications, in *A74*, 345–65, 1869.

British journalists visited Slovenia and some of its mountain areas in 1907. A wave of interest for the area, especially for the Julian Alps, was aroused after the First World War by the mountain books of Dr Julius Kugy, a friend of British mountaineers. H E G Tyndale, the prominent English alpinist, editor of the *Alpine Journal* and humanist, who knew a number of languages, translated two of Kugy's books under the titles *Alpine Pilgrimage* (1934) and *Son of the Mountains: The Life of an Alpine Guide* (1938). The first of these was very favourably reviewed in *A746*, 428–31, 1934, and there were several reprints.

Kugy was born in Gorizia in 1858 in the castle of the Counts Coronini, to which the family had fled from a cholera epidemic raging in Trieste. He was the grandson of the Slovene poet Jovan Vesel Koseski. He studied law in Vienna and obtained a doctorate. His father was a businessman dealing in colonial products and from him Kugy inherited both a fortune and a commitment to do serious work, so that he was forced to take night trains when he travelled from Trieste to Vienna to attend a Sunday concert, or to his beloved mountains. And punctually on Monday mornings Kugy would be sitting at his desk again, no matter how strenuous the weekend had been. To both of Kugy's books Tyndale wrote introductions giving a picture of Kugy as a man, a mountaineer, a music lover and writer. At the end of the First World War Kugy lost his fortune overnight and changed from Austrian to Italian citizenship. His only means of support was the income from his books. We can imagine his feelings when the British expressed an interest in the translations of his books and made him an honorary member of the Alpine Club. In his book *Mountain Paths* Tyndale relates how Kugy's description of the Julian Alps and of Triglav, about which he had known nothing at all until that time, had opened up a completely new view of the alpine world for him.⁷ That was his reason for visiting Kugy in Trieste, and later also at Ovčja vas (Valbruna), where Kugy gave him a warm welcome one August evening when he came down all bruised from Višarje (Monte Lusari). Kugy spent his holidays in Valbruna every year, in the house of his former guide and companion Anton Oitzinger. Tyndale described the meeting and characterized Kugy: 'I had already met him in Trieste, where at once I found myself on common ground with one for whom the classic British mountaineers are the bearers of an incomparable tradition, and watched his reverent handling of a much-travelled and weather-worn translation of Gilbert and Churchill; now I had occasion, as he helped me across the village street, to feel the colossal strength of arm which could make light work of raising an 18-stone body up the Grande Muraille of La Meije.'⁸ In chapter XVI of his book *Mountain Paths*, entitled 'The Eastern Julian Alps', Tyndale describes a tour with Kugy from Valbruna to Santa Maria di Trenta (Pri cerkvi), where they



70 *Vrata valley and Triglav.*

Photo: Jaka Čop

went to visit Kugy's friend, the forester Albert Bois de Chesne, who was famous on three accounts. Firstly, here, beneath the peaks of the eastern Julian Alps, he had established a unique botanical garden of alpine flora. He named it Juliana and it is still tended today. Secondly, Bois de Chesne always offered his visitors an excellent plum brandy (slivovic), and, thirdly, there were always tasty trout straight out of the Soča river, which were so big that they satisfied even the appetite of the enormous Kugy. Bois de Chesne put his Bosnian pony Ali at Tyndale's disposal and as his guides appointed Loys and Jože Komac, who led him to the summit of Triglav. They set off in bad weather, which other mountaineers did not trust, and thus they were able to enjoy alone the view in the sunshine as far as the Adriatic. From the distance they heard Yugoslav mountaineers shouting Le-La-I-Tou, which upset Jože's hunter's soul, because they frightened the chamois. There are many Yugoslav mountaineers still today who do not approve of their compatriots' loud 'singing'.

Through Kugy, Tyndale met the Austrian mountaineer Dr Paul Kaltenecker and his friend Karl, with whom he visited the celebrated Sava valley and climbed up the N face of Mojstrovka. Tyndale described this climb in chapter XX entitled, 'Above the Save Valley'. By a happy coincidence I had the honour four years ago to make the acquaintance—in the Julian Alps—of Tyndale's daughter Lady Gainford with her husband, who were kind enough to provide a hitherto unpublished photograph.

In Kugy's *Alpine Pilgrimage* and in Tyndale's book *Mountain Paths* there are photographs of Kugy smoking a pipe. During the war, when there were alarms in Trieste, Kugy did not want to go to a shelter. He hated wandering around with a suitcase, and even more the way people discussed the course of the war. And so it happened in mid-January 1944 that he stayed in his flat and fell while reaching for his pipe. As a consequence of his fall he died on 5 February 1944. At Kugy's death Tyndale wrote an obituary (*AJ54*, 293–6, 1944), in which he found warm and respectful words for Kugy's work and his services to mountaineering.

At Kugy's recommendation, Willi Merkl was invited to London before his fatal journey to the Himalaya. Kugy invited a more fortunate Himalayan, Tom G Longstaff, to write a chapter on his impression of Triglav for the book entitled *Fünf Jahrhunderte Triglav* (Five centuries of Triglav) which he edited and which appeared in Graz in 1938. Longstaff admitted that after 40 years of devotion to the mountains, the Julian Alps had remained 'a goal of greatest desire'. Nor did Longstaff's enthusiasm subsequently wane. In his review of his travels, entitled *This my Voyage*, he devoted considerable space to the Julian Alps, the mountain lakes, the flora and fauna, the Slovenes and the hours of peace and beauty which he and his wife had enjoyed three times in Slovenia. He too remembered the hospitality of Bois de Chesne at Santa Maria di Trenta and a meeting there with the octogenarian Kugy, who still had the stature of a Hercules, combined with the sensibility of a musician and lover of beauty.⁹

Another Himalayan climber who visited the Slovenian mountains in 1929 was George Ingle Finch. In that year he lectured about Himalayan expeditions and tours of the Alps in Maribor and Ljubljana. In 1939 Hugh Ruttledge, the leader of the British Himalayan expeditions of 1933 and 1936, gave a lecture in



71 *Jakob Savinšek's statue of Julius Kugy (1952). Razor in background.*

Photo: Jaka Cop

Ljubljana; and in 1938 Leo S Amery also visited the Slovene mountains. His visit was reported in *A750*, 92–4, 1938. At the age of 64 he did climbs such as the Slovene route on the N face of Triglav and Kugy's route on the N face of Škrlatica.

In 1953 Fanny Susan Copeland Barkworth celebrated her 80th birthday in Ljubljana. On that occasion Dr Arnošt Brilej wrote an article dedicated to her in *Planinski vestnik*, treating the British and Slovene mountains.¹⁰ Two years ago the Slovenes paid tribute to the memory of this lively and shrewd little lady with a translation of her book *Beautiful Mountains*.¹¹ In the visitor's book in the house in Podkoren where Sir Humphry Davy used to stay Miss Copeland has written: 'Fanny S Copeland, daughter of the explorer Dr Ralph Copeland, late Astronomer Royal for Scotland (d. 1905), English lecturer, Ljubljana. Jan. 23, 1932.' Miss Copeland was born in 1872 in Parsonstown in Ireland. On her mother's side she could trace her ancestry back to Baruch Spinoza. She was related to Tom Longstaff. She went to school in Edinburgh and later continued her studies of philology, singing and the piano in London. She married the composer and conductor Barkworth and was an acquaintance of G B Shaw. Miss Copeland had been in contact with Yugoslavs since 1914 and during the First World War she began translating for them. She was one of the translators at the peace negotiations in Paris, and in 1921 she accepted a position as lecturer in English at the University of Ljubljana. Together with the Slovene pianist and mountaineer Marijan Lipovšek, who translated her book into Slovenian, she put on a concert of Scottish folk songs, which she sang herself in Ljubljana. In addition to her work at the university she wrote for British magazines including *Graphic*, *Time and Tide*, *The Observer*, *The Scotsman* and *The Alpine Journal*. Although she was no longer young, she began touring the Slovenian mountains in the company of young Slovenian mountaineers. At the age of 80 she reached the top of Triglav in 14 hours. Thanks to her, the *A7* published several articles by Slovene climbers. In the years 1936–38 she organized a two-year lecture tour through Great Britain for the talented Slovene mountaineer M M Debelak, who with her husband Edo Deržaj and a Scottish friend (E A M Wedderburn—*Ed.*) found a route up the NE face of Ben Nevis which was named the Slav route. Miss Copeland persuaded the Le Play Society in London to visit Slovenia to study the Slovenian mountain landscape. The members of this Society first came to Slovenia in 1932 and then eight times more. In 1933, L Dudley Stamp published a book about this group entitled *Slovene Studies*. Miss Copeland translated into Slovenian various articles about the country which British teachers and pupils from London and Nottingham wrote after a visit to Slovenia in 1931. With M M Debelak she wrote in 1936 a little book, *A Short Guide to the Slovene Alps*. The Slovene mountains held Miss Copeland all her life. Her descriptions and experiences of these mountains are romantic and rational, roguish and serious. During the war the Gestapo threatened to kill her, and the Italians interned her at the age of 70 at Bibbiena near Florence. In exile she wrote a deeply sensitive poem entitled 'Nostalgia Alpina'. After the end of the war she went to London, but in 1953 she returned to Ljubljana where she died on 28 June 1970 at the age of 98. As she had wished, she was buried in the cemetery at Dovje near Mojstrana, at the foot of the Slovene

mountains, in a place where many Slovene mountaineers found eternal peace.

The Julian Alps are still attractive to British mountaineers, and hundreds of British tourists come to Bled, Bohinj or Kranjska gora on guided coach tours, admiring the Alps from afar or from the bottom up. In 1960, in the Tyrch Hotel at Capel Curig, there happened to be a lady who was just such a tourist, and who drew the Julian Alps to the attention of the professional guide Dudley Stevens. She declared the Julian Alps to be completely unspoiled by the invasion of tourists, superbly beautiful and possessing the most impressive mountain peaks she had ever seen. Stevens had for a long time been looking for a region of high peaks that were safe for climbing and walking, for young and older participants. Talking with the unknown lady, Stevens thought that he had found the right region for his future tours. He and his mountaineering friend Bob Roberts went to explore these mountains, totally unknown to them, and arrived one day in 1960 at 2am at the deserted station of Jesenice. Their reception by the Yugoslav customs officers and by the Julian Alps was the same: cold and mysterious. As they followed the Vrata valley, the clouds started to thin out, and glimpses of small sky-windows gave them hope that everything was not cloud. Slowly the Julians revealed themselves in the most spectacular way imaginable. Stevens became enthusiastic about the Slovenian network of routes, the system of safeguarded and way-marked tracks which gave, not only the names of the next peaks, but also an indication of the necessary climbing time. They encountered kind people, companions in their love and enthusiasm for nature, mountains and beauty. From 1961 until 1972 Stevens organized and accompanied nine professional and three private tours to the Julian Alps. Later, he had to take leave of the mountain paradise because of an illness, and started to write his alpine memoirs *The Irresistible Challenge*,¹² mostly treating his tours from 1946 to 1972. Stevens begins with his first trip in 1928, when as a young clerk in Manchester he joined his senior for a day's walking in the Derbyshire Peak District. Later he visited Snowdonia, the Scottish Highlands and the Swiss Alps. The second part of his manuscript is dedicated to the Julian Alps which he studied before his departure via Kugy's *Alpine Pilgrimage*. The foreword to Stevens's book is written by W A Poucher, who says that he could not put the book down after starting to read it. Stevens is a real master of beautiful descriptions, with a kind and good sense of humour which never hurts anybody; he is modest and correct. It is not difficult to discover his humanism and his pleasure in being able to enjoy the life and the beauties of the world.

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- 12 The memoirs have not been printed in English. Marijan Lipovšek translated them into Slovenian and wrote a commentary. The Slovenian edition *Neubranljivi izziv* was printed in Ljubljana in 1987.

