

One Hundred Years Ago

(with extracts from the *Alpine Journal*)

C.A. Russell

Plates 77–80

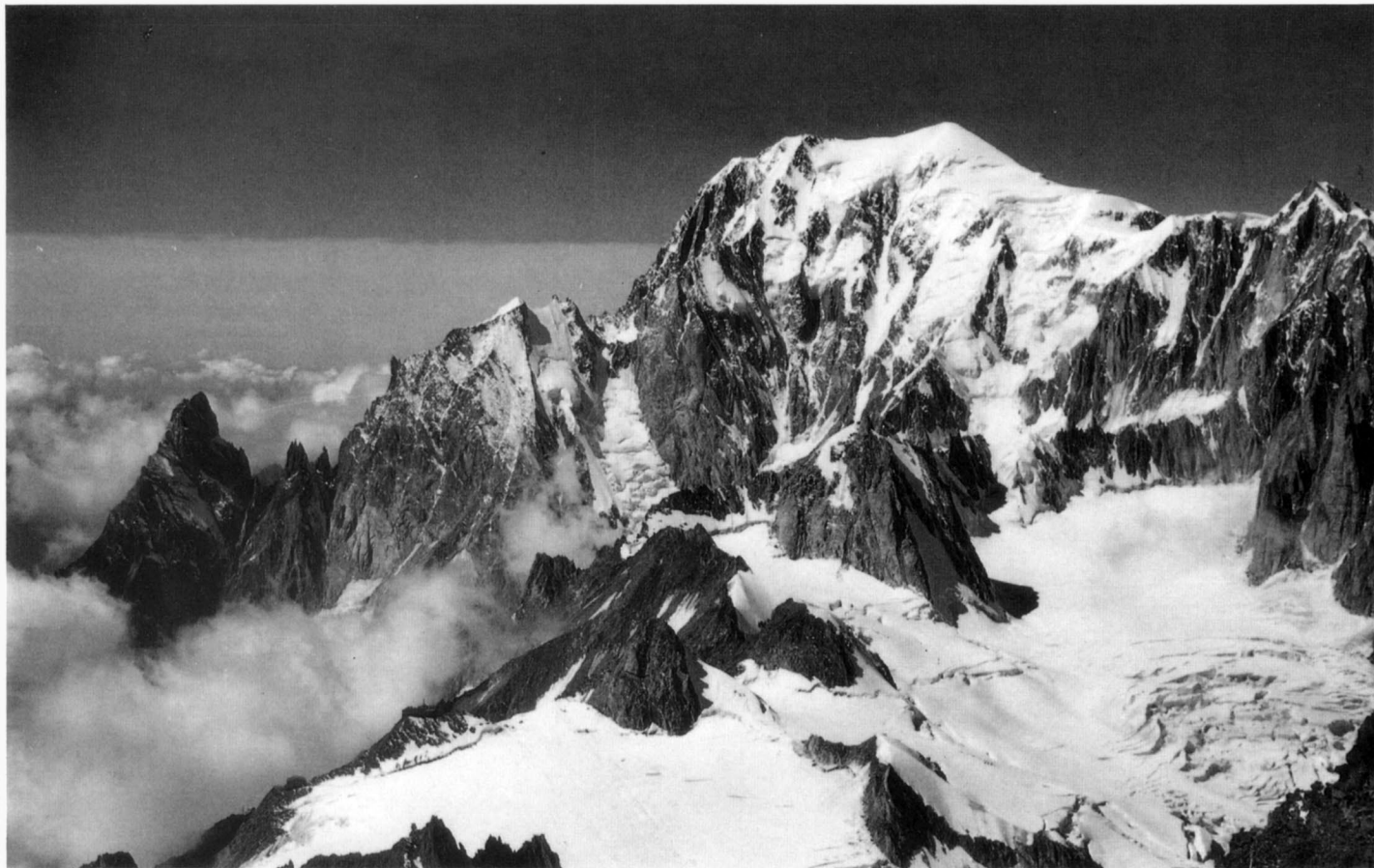
‘Since the year 1885 no such weather has been experienced in Switzerland as that which has been general throughout the country during the last fortnight. Snowstorms of exceptional severity have followed each other with alarming rapidity, causing considerable loss of life and immense inconvenience by impeding, and, in not a few cases, entirely stopping the traffic. On some of the railways communication has been interrupted for two and three days at a time; and what is of rare occurrence, the diligences have been unable to cross the high passes. In the Juras snow lies on the roads to the depth of three and four feet, while in parts of the Engadine it is seven and eight feet deep. Reports from Haute Savoie also speak of terribly severe weather, and in the neighbourhood of Grenoble snow fell for four days uninterruptedly, and some of the neighbouring villages were entirely shut off from the rest of the world for forty-eight hours at a stretch.’

The snowfalls experienced throughout the Alps during the opening weeks of 1887 were, by any standard, exceptional and only one winter expedition of note was recorded. On 8 March, during a brief improvement in the weather, Emil Boss, with Ulrich Almer, completed the first winter ascent of the Finsteraarhorn. Starting from the Schwarzegg hut above Grindelwald the party reached the Agassizjoch and followed the NW ridge to the summit, where they enjoyed extensive views and an agreeably warm temperature.

The severe winter was followed by a long period of unsettled weather and very little serious climbing was possible until the middle of July when, as in the previous year, conditions began to improve. However, in the Mont Blanc range an important climb was completed between 2 and 4 July when Moritz von Kuffner, with Alexander Burgener, Joseph Furrer and a Swiss porter made the first ascent of the SE, or Frontier, ridge of Mont Maudit. In his account of the expedition von Kuffner wrote that the ascent was difficult rather than dangerous and pointed out that settled weather is an essential requirement for this route, which is still regarded as one of the finest high altitude ridge climbs in the range.

In the same region later in the month, on 29 July, the von Kuffner party, without the porter, climbed the Aiguille des Glaciers by way of the SE ridge, the first time that the summit had been reached from this direction.

The improvement in the weather coincided with the arrival of numerous parties in all the principal regions, where the completion of new routes continued apace. In the Dauphiné on 29 July J Maitre, with Pierre Gaspard and Maxime Bourbon made the first ascent of the N peak of the Grande Ruine, while in the Graian Alps on 8 August the NNW face of the Grande Casse was climbed for the first time by Pierre and André Puiseux with Joseph Amiez.



77 *Mont Blanc with (R) Mont Maudit and the Frontier ridge.*

Photo: C.A. Russell

In the Pennine Alps a famous climb was accomplished on 16 July when A F Mummery and his wife Mary, with Burgener and a member of the Andenmatten family, made the first ascent of the Teufelsgrat. In her account in Mummery's book *My Climbs in the Alps and Caucasus* Mrs Mummery recalled that during an ascent of the Matterhorn a few days previously Burgener had suggested that she should go up the Teufelsgrat. 'I was proud of the compliment, and we solemnly shook hands, Burgener saying the while that the nominal proprietor of the ridge and all his angels should not turn us back, once we were fairly started. For the benefit of those who may not be well acquainted with the Alpine possessions of his Satanic Majesty, it may be pointed out that the Teufelsgrat is the south-western ridge of the Täschhorn.'

Starting from Täschalp the party ascended the Weingarten glacier and, on reaching the main ridge above the Kinhorn, soon ran into difficulties. After many hours of exhausting work both guides had been injured and the outcome was already in doubt when a serious obstacle was reached which seemed to bar further progress. 'The ridge by which we had been ascending appeared to end abruptly, and there was no question of going forwards—immeasurable space yawned in front. Twenty feet or more to our left the true ridge mounted rapidly in a series of precipitous steps; between us and it was the most awful chasm it has ever been my lot to see. This formation gave, indeed, the impression that there were two ridges, separated from each other by an impassable gulf. No wonder, then, that black horror seized us. Return was not to be thought of, and advance seemed impossible. There we four stood, absolutely powerless, our teeth chattering with the bitter cold, and the damp, cruel mist ever driving across, threatening to add obscurity to our other bewilderment.'

Fortunately Mummery, aided by the rope, managed to cross the gap and reach the first of the steps. The upper section of the route was then completed without difficulty, though it was late in the day before the summit was finally reached. Any route on the Täschhorn is a serious undertaking and the first ascent of the Teufelsgrat, with its great length and treacherous rock, was a considerable achievement, even for this formidable party.

Another fine climb in the same region was completed on 28 July when H W Topham, with Aloys Supersaxo and a porter, made the first ascent of the Cresta Signal, the E ridge of the Signalkuppe or Punta Gnifetti, at the edge of the great E face of Monte Rosa. Earlier in the month Topham and G H Rendall, with Supersaxo, ascended two other unclimbed ridges: the Hohlaubgrat, the ENE ridge of the Allalinhorn, on 12 July and the SW ridge of the Fletschhorn on 16 July.

Also in the Pennine Alps two parties, those of W A B Coolidge, with Christian and Rudolf Almer, and George Broke, with Adolf and Theodor Andenmatten, joined forces on the Fletschjoch on 27 July to make the first ascent of the NNE ridge of the Lagginhorn. On 8 August Oscar Eckenstein, with Matthias Zurbriggen, made the first recorded ascent of the Stecknadelhorn and went on to complete the first ascent of the NW ridge of the Nadelhorn. In the Bernese Oberland on 31 July Hermann Woolley, with Christian Jössi and Johann Kaufmann, made the first complete ascent of the NW ridge of the Gross Fiescherhorn.



78 *Täschhorn and Alphubel with (L) the Teufelsgrat.*

Photo: C.A. Russell

An expedition of considerable scientific importance which aroused much interest was that of Joseph Vallot who with three companions spent three days and nights, from 27 to 30 July, in a tent on the summit of Mont Blanc in order to study a number of problems, including mountain sickness. Vallot, who climbed to the summit on no less than five different occasions during the year, reached the conclusion that 'mountain sickness, at any rate up to 20,000 feet, can, in the majority of instances, be overcome by training. The temperature of the body is not lower than it is in the plains, and therefore the "mal de montagne" is not due to the lowering of the temperature, but to the imperfect oxygenation of the blood.'

The centenary of H B de Saussure's ascent of Mont Blanc occurred on 3 August and Vallot was present at the celebrations held in Chamonix later in the month. A statue of de Saussure and Jacques Balmat was unveiled and a banquet took place at Couttet's Hotel, where a congratulatory telegram from the President of the Alpine Club was received. 'The streets of Chamonix were lavishly decorated with garlands and arches, and bands of music abounded, while at night there was a torchlight procession and illuminations (even at the Grands Mulets) and fireworks.'

For the most part the weather was dry and settled throughout the latter half of the climbing season and by the end of August many rock and mixed routes were in excellent condition. On 31 August the centenary celebrations were continued by Henri Dunod who, accompanied by Emile Rey, François Simond and two porters, succeeded in making the first traverse from the Grand to the Petit Dru. 'The descent of the nearly vertical rocks to the gap between the two peaks was extremely difficult and occupied three hours. A great length of rope was used, and it would be quite impossible to get back again without leaving the rope there.'

A few days later, in the Pennine Alps, on 7 September Eckenstein, Alexander Seiler and B von Mallinckrodt, with Burgener, Zurbriggen and A Supersaxo, were fortunate to escape without incident while making the first ascent of the very dangerous SW face of the Dom. In the Arolla district two first ascents of note were those of Pointe Barnes, at the S end of the Bouquetins ridge, by G S Barnes, W C Slingsby and Miss Blair Oliphant, with Martin Vuignier, on 30 August and the S peak of the Aiguilles Rouges d'Arolla by Slingsby, Topham and Arthur Macnamara, with Jean Maître, on 3 September. Four days later Topham and Macnamara, with Maître, reached the summit of Mont Blanc de Cheilon by way of the unclimbed E ridge.

In the Bernina Alps routes of considerable difficulty were being completed. On 1 September the Bumillergrat, the central pillar of the N face of Piz Palü, was climbed for the first time by Hans Bumiller, with Martin Schocher, Johann Gross and Christian Schnitzler. Later in the month, on 22 September, Paul Güssfeldt, with Rey and J B Aymonod, overcame serious difficulties to complete the first descent of the Eisnase route on the NW flank of Piz Scerscen.

In the Dolomites a remarkable achievement was the first ascent of the Torre Winkler, one of the Vajolet towers, by Georg Winkler, solo, on 17 September. Starting from a gully between the Winkler and the next tower, the Stabeler, and using ledges, grooves and a narrow chimney now known as the Winkler crack



79 Vajolet Towers, Dolomites, with (R) Torre Winkler.

Photo: C. Douglas Milner

he reached the summit in just over two hours, an outstanding climb for the period.

Outside the Alps D W Freshfield visited the Caucasus for six weeks during July and August, accompanied by François and Michel Dévouassoud and Joseph Désailoud. Freshfield, a member of the first British expedition to the range 19 years earlier, joined forces with Maurice de Déchy, the Hungarian explorer, who was making his fourth visit to the region to continue his photography and topographical work.

After crossing from Baksan to Mestia on the southern side of the chain by way of the Adyrsu pass Freshfield examined Ushba and on 29 July, with Michel Dévouassoud and Désailoud climbed its SE outlier, Gulba (3210m). A few days later, on 6 August, with all three guides, he succeeded in making the first ascent of Tetnuld (4853m), which had been examined by C T Dent's party while ascending the neighbouring Gestola in the previous year. In his account of the climb Freshfield recalled how the party, after crossing a large snow terrace, reached the S ridge.

'Henceforth our path lay along the ridge. It looked inviting; fairly broad, not too steep, and with no uncomfortable shimmer of ice. But it was long, and the softness of the snow made it longer. At every step the leader sank over his ankles. Consequently leading was exhausting, and we had frequently to change. From time to time there was a little variety, a narrowing of the ridge which made it convenient, after careful inspection, to trust to the flat top of a substantial cornice—or a sudden steep rise which forced us to zigzag and hold on to our iceaxes. The hours passed; but there was too much to look at on our airy edge for the time to seem long. Close at hand were our gigantic neighbours, the snowpeaks of the central group. To the west Elbruz loomed higher and higher as we mounted, and all the lesser heights bowed before the great white throne. There seemed to be less bulk in our peak, little but air round us. Ten minutes more and a white cone cut the sky, it flattened at our feet, our eyes overlooked it. I ran on a few level yards, there was nothing more; two ridges fell steeply from my feet. Tetnuld was conquered.

Illimitable shining fields of space, waves upon waves of distance, clothed in hues that grow softer and more aerial as they curve to the enormously remote horizon; to the north the level lines of the Steppe, to the south tossed Armenian Highlands, east and west snowy vales and pinnacles, a silence that might be felt, such were the impressions of the first moments on this glorious peak.'

On the following day the whole party, including de Déchy, a number of porters and a Cossack, recrossed the chain by way of the Tsanner pass, where the descent was not to everyone's liking. The porters 'were all praying, or swearing—it was difficult to say which—on the cornice. One after another peered over, and, drawing back with horror, gave vent to a brief solo, which was followed by a fresh chorus from the whole force of the company. We thought example might be better than precept; so charging our Cossack to explain what was to be done next, we started down the rib of rocks. It was steep but perfectly easy, and in ten minutes we were across the bergschrund.'

But even this example failed to cheer the porters, or to induce them to follow. 'They jabbered, they screamed, they gesticulated, they seemed, as is the wont



Photo: H. Woolley (Alpine Club Library Collection)

with excited barbarians, on the verge of assaulting one another. They did, in short, everything but what we wanted them to do—come on. At last we were rudely warned that a great resolve had been made by receiving one of the tents, which was sent bowling down on us through the soft snow in a perfectly reckless manner. Other baggage, including barometers, followed; and then three of the most daring spirits tied themselves to the Cossack. This spontaneous use of the rope showed that they were not altogether beyond the reach of new ideas! They came down the rocks with the utmost nervousness; clumsily yet safely. But on the steep snow below one of the four missed his footing. A few seconds of headlong descent, some bold bounds in air, in one of which the half-open bergschrund was safely cleared—and the quartette were lying, a panting heap, at our side.’

Finally, on 12 August, Freshfield, with Désaillood, made the first ascent of Ukiu (4346m) to the N of Koshtantau.

Another expedition of note was that of Francis Younghusband who, after an adventurous journey across the Gobi desert, succeeded in crossing the Muztagh pass to the Baltoro glacier on his way into Kashmir. While approaching the pass Younghusband became the first European traveller to see the N side of K2. ‘We could see it through a break in the mountains rising up straight, bold, and solitary, covered from foot to summit with perpetual snow. The upper part, for perhaps 5,000 feet, was a perfect cone, and seems to be composed almost entirely of ice and snow, the accumulation of ages. The lower part was more precipitous, but not too steep to throw off the snow altogether, while at the base was a great glacier formed by the masses of snow which fell from its sides. It was a magnificent sight and I could scarcely tear myself away from it.’

In Wales the gradual development of rock-climbing was continued in April when Eckenstein and T V Sully completed a new route on Lliwedd by way of the lower part of the Central gully and a traverse to the W buttress. In the Lake District in September a famous landmark appeared on a narrow ledge high on the face of Scafell Pinnacle when Edward Hopkinson, with his brothers Charles and Albert and W N Tribe, assembled the small pile of stones known as Hopkinson’s Cairn. Although numerous attempts were made to force a route up the face to the cairn, many years were to elapse before it was finally reached from below.

In conclusion, it is interesting to recall the words of F C Grove in his valedictory address, read before the Alpine Club in February 1887. After drawing attention to the increasing facilities for world travel he hoped that members with time at their disposal ‘will not only seek the snows of the Caucasus, but will make more degrees longitude, east or west, as the case may be.’

With the benefit of hindsight the present writer is pleased to report that they did.