
One Hundred Years Ago

(With extracts from the *Alpine Journal*)

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The fine and settled weather which prevailed in January, and the comparatively small quantity of snow, are no doubt the reasons of the numerous and important winter ascents made this year in the Alps.'

Among those who took advantage of the favourable conditions experienced at the beginning of 1888 were Vittorio, Corradino, Erminio and Gaudenzio Sella, who on 5 January, with Battista, Daniele and Giuseppe Maquignaz, Emile Rey and two porters, completed the first winter traverse of Mont Blanc. Starting at midnight from the Italian hut on the Aiguilles Grises rocks the party, whose attempt in the previous year had been defeated by strong winds, reached the summit and descended on the French side. 'On the summit the tent in which M Vallot spent three days last year was found in perfect condition. Many steps had to be cut on the Bosses; mist, then darkness, came on; and the Grands Mulets was not reached till 10.30pm, after a very remarkable and daring enterprise.'

In the Bernese Oberland, on the same day, Mrs E P Jackson and Emil Boss, with Ulrich Almer and Johann Kaufmann, made the first winter ascent of the Gross Lauteraarhorn. 'Leaving the Schwarzegg hut at 4am, they crossed the Strahlegg Pass and made direct for some rocks running south from the peak; these were followed until a snow col at the foot of the final arête was reached. The rocks of the arête were in perfect condition, quite free from ice or snow, and warm as in summer.' On 11 January the same party, with Almer and Christian Jossi, completed the first winter ascent of the Gross Fiescherhorn, having reached the summit by way of the Bergli hut, the Ewigschneefeld and the SW ridge.

Five days later, with Peter Baumann as second guide, the party completed the first traverse of the Jungfrau in winter, reaching the summit from the Bergli hut and descending to the Wengern Alp. W A B Coolidge, whose party had made the first winter ascent of the Jungfrau 14 years earlier and who was staying at Grindelwald in January, wrote that Mrs Jackson's traverse was 'a difficult feat at any time, and in winter more so than ever from the necessity of passing a second night somewhere on the mountain. Her party spent it in a crevasse and were frost-bitten, notwithstanding which the expedition must always rank as one of the most splendid ever achieved in winter.'

The fine weather was followed by six weeks of heavy snowfalls and in many regions severe damage was caused by avalanches. 'In the North Italian valleys more than one hundred lives are known to have been lost while in the Saas Valley, in Randa and the adjoining districts, there has been loss of life, and

great loss of property, especially cattle.' For much of the spring and summer conditions remained unsettled and the weather experienced throughout the Alps during the climbing season was the worst for many years, few expeditions of note being completed. In the Bernese Oberland on 22 July Coolidge, after climbing the Gross Fiescherhorn with Christian Almer junior and his brother Rudolf, made the first ascent of the heavily corniced SW ridge of Ochs or the Klein Fiescherhorn. In the Dauphiné the first ascent of the Roche Méane, to the E of the Grande Ruine, was completed on 25 July by G Merzbacher, with Pierre Gaspard junior. On 28 July in the Pennine Alps, despite a snowstorm lasting for more than two hours, R F Ball, with Ambros Supersaxo and Ludwig Zurbiggen, reached the summit of the Lenzspitze by way of the unclimbed S ridge.

The one exception to the gloomy conditions was the second week in August, when the weather was fine and settled and most parties turned their attention to the lower peaks. In the Mont Blanc range A Barbey and L Kurz, with Justin Bessard and Joseph Simond, reached the summit of the unclimbed Aiguille de l'A Neuve on 11 August and on the following day made the first ascent of the highest point of the Aiguilles Rouges du Dolent, now known as Pointe Kurz. On 14 August in the Bregaglia group T Curtius and R Wiesner, with Christian Klucker, completed the first ascent of the Sciora di Dentro, the highest peak of the Sciora chain.

One of the few mountaineers able to take advantage of the good weather was Vittorio Sella, whose party had just arrived in the Dauphiné to climb the great peaks. With perfect conditions for his camera Sella took many superb photographs, including complete panoramas from the summits of the Barre des Écrins, the Meije, Mont Pelvoux and Pic Coolidge.

The principal achievements of the season were undoubtedly those of Miss Katharine Richardson who on 13 August, with Emile Rey and Jean Baptiste Bich, made the first direct ascent of the S ridge of the Aiguille de Bionnassay. From the summit the party then completed, in descent, the first passage of the delicate E ridge and, after continuing across the Col de Bionnassay, the first traverse of the entire ridge to the Dôme du Goûter. 'It had been reserved for a lady to accomplish the traverse of an arête which had hitherto been found impracticable, and to prove that it is possible to pass over the summit of the peak straight along to the Dôme. Thus a splendid high-level route has been opened up, which has long been aimed at, though it is improbable that this will be generally adopted as a short and easy route up Mont Blanc from the western or S Gervais side.'

Miss Richardson then moved to the Dauphiné where, on 24 August with Bich and Pierre Gaspard senior, she became the first lady to ascend the Grand Pic, the western and highest peak of the Meije.

The exploits of another lady also attracted considerable interest and admiration. The Queen of Italy, who had been for some years in the habit of staying for a short time at Courmayeur, 'made several mountain excursions, such as the Mont de la Saxe and the Cramont. Her chief expedition was to the Col du Géant. Having slept at the Mont Fréty inn on the night of August 16, her Majesty started the next morning at 4am accompanied by a retinue of twenty-



76. *Aiguille de Bionnassay.*



77. *Lenzspitze with (R) S ridge.*

seven persons, including two ladies of her court, Henri Séraphin being the chief guide of the party. The caravan reached the col at 10am, but the weather became worse, and it commenced to snow, so that the party were forced to pass the night in the hut. It is stated that the Queen was much amused at this little adventure, but her ladies far less so. On the 18th the party, despite the bad weather, started downwards and returned to Courmayeur that night, the Queen displaying great courage and calmness, and being enthusiastically received on her return to her summer residence.'

In the Caucasus exploration of the range continued apace, with no less than three English parties in the field. First to arrive was A F Mummery, with Heinrich Zurfluh of Meiringen, who were accompanied by a Tartar porter. Starting from Bezingi early in July they examined Dykh Tau (5204m), the second highest peak in the range, and then spent two weeks gathering further information about the topography of the area, crossing a number of glaciers and high passes.

On 23 July a camp was established at the foot of the SW buttress of Dykh Tau and in his book *My Climbs in the Alps and Caucasus* Mummery recalled that after watching the last flicker of sunlight play round the topmost crags he and Zurfluh 'crept into the shelter of tent and sleeping-bags. The hardier Tartar refused the proffered place beside us, and, having washed his head, his feet, and hands, in due accordance with the ritual of his creed, lay down in the open beside a great rock. Zurfluh regarded these proceedings with much sad interest, feeling certain that the bitter wind would freeze him to death before morning.

'At 1am, Zurfluh, who had kept awake to bemoan the Tartar's slow and pitiable decease, crept out of the tent to investigate how this process was getting on. A few minutes later, with his teeth chattering, but none the less with real delight in face and voice, he told me that not merely was the Tartar still alive but, bare feet and all, appeared to be enjoying a refreshing sleep!'

The following day Mummery and Zurfluh overcame numerous difficulties to complete the first ascent of Dykh Tau. 'Every peak in Europe, Elbruz alone excepted, was below us, and from our watch-tower of 17,054 feet we gazed at the rolling world. Turning to the left, a few steps brought me to the culminating point, and I sat down on its shattered crest. Huge clouds were by now wrapping Shkara in an ever darkening mantle, and the long ridge of Janga was buried in dense, matted banks of vapour white and brilliant above, but dark and evil along their ever lowering under-edges. Koshtantau shone in its snowy armour, white against black billows of heaped-up storm.'

Some weeks later the second party, consisting of J G Cockin, H W Holder and Hermann Woolley, with the Grindelwald guides Ulrich Almer and Christian Roth, arrived in the area with the intention of ascending Dykh Tau, believing it to be unclimbed. At Bezingi the porter who had accompanied Mummery and Zurfluh was engaged and his account of their achievement was received with some disappointment. After camping beside the Bezingi glacier the party was compelled to abandon an attempt from the SW side due to lack of time but succeeded, on 20 August, in climbing the N ridge to the summit, where a cairn built by Zurfluh was found.

On 24 August the party, with the exception of Cockin, made the first

ascent of Katuin Tau (4985m) by way of the Bezingi face and a few days later, on 3 September, Holder, Cockin and the guides reached the summit of the unclimbed Saluinan Bashi (4348m) N of the Tsanner pass. After Holder and Woolley had left for home on 4 September Cockin and the guides continued climbing in the region for a further month, making the first ascents of Shkhara (5201m) on 7 September and the E peak of Jangi Tau (5038m) five days later, in each case by a route on the Bezingi side. Finally, on 28 September, Cockin and Almer completed the first ascent of the N peak of Ushba (4695m), a fine achievement for the period.

The third party consisted of C T Dent, W F Donkin and Harry Fox, with the guides Kaspar Streich and Johann Fischer, but shortly after their arrival at the beginning of August Dent was forced to return home due to illness. On 17 August Donkin, Fox and the guides, after unsuccessful attempts on both peaks of Ushba, reached the unclimbed SE summit of Dongus Orun (4442m), at the head of the Baksan valley. This achievement was, however, marred by tragedy when, as subsequently established, all four members of the party were lost at the end of August during an attempt to climb Koshtantau. When their absence was eventually reported by an interpreter searchers were organized, but no trace of the missing party was found.

Further afield, areas of the Drakensberg range in South Africa were explored by the Rev A H Stocker and his brother, F R Stocker, who made the first recorded ascent of Champagne Castle (3377m), one of the highest peaks, on 26 April. Some months later, on 19 July, the same party completed the first recorded ascent of the Sterkhorn (2973m).

In the Canadian Rockies the Selkirk range was visited in March by the brothers H W and E H Topham. Despite deep snow they reached a height of 2750m and examined Mount Sir Donald. Later in the year the Rev W S Green, assisted by the Royal Geographical Society, carried out an exploration of the Selkirks. His party completed a number of climbs including, on 9 August, the first ascent of Mount Bonney (3050m).

Still further north the Topham brothers, George Broke and William Williams spent three weeks attempting to climb Mount St Elias. Despite a difficult approach the party explored the S and W sides of the peak and on 2 August, with the exception of Broke, reached a height of 3470m on the S ridge.

A remarkable achievement, also in the far north, was the first crossing of the Greenland ice cap by Fridtjof Nansen, the Norwegian explorer. In August and September, using snowshoes, skis and specially constructed light, flexible sledges equipped with sails, Nansen's party travelled some 440km across the ice cap from Umivik on the E coast to Godthaab, reaching a height of 2700m during the journey.

At home an important climb was completed in the Lake District on 15 July when W C Slingsby, W P Haskett Smith, Geoffrey Hastings and Edward Hopkinson made the first ascent of Slingsby's Chimney on Scafell Pinnacle. After climbing up Steep Ghyll 'to the foot of the great pitch, they turned to the right and soon reached a long narrow rock. Above this, a steep slab led the party to the foot of a nearly perpendicular chimney, which was only 18 inches wide. One of the party stood upon the shoulders of two of the others, and then



78. *Dykh Tau from S, 1886.*



79. *Champagne Castle, Drakensberg.*

wriggled up the chimney. After 110 feet of rope had been paid out to him, he found a secure place, where he sat down and drew in the rope whilst the others came up, one by one.'

In conclusion, it seems appropriate to note the following extracts from a foreword by Dent, then President of the Alpine Club, to the one hundredth number of the *Alpine Journal*, which was published in May 1888. 'Twenty-five years ago the first number was introduced in somewhat modest fashion. Little was predicted for the new venture, save that death from starvation was not an imminent probability. Such a mode of extinction is at least as unlikely now as it was then. As a matter of fact, the *Alpine Journal*, profiting by the occasional use of stimulants in the form of adverse criticism, has thriven and waxed fat; to such an extent, indeed, that an index to the volumes published up to date has become a paramount necessity. When this want has been supplied it will, we believe, be found that the *Alpine Journal*, so far as its subject matter is dealt with, constitutes the most trustworthy guide-book to the Alps and work of reference on general mountaineering exploration that exists in any language.'

It may well be, 100 years later, that many of the present readers would agree with these sentiments.

