Robert Townson – The Great Explorer of the Tatra

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(Plates 53, 54)

Robert Townson played an important part in the exploration of the Tatra mountains which, at the time of his visit in 1793, formed part of the border between Hungary and Poland. I believe that the story of Townson's trip, which included an ascent of Mt Lomnický (2632m), might be of interest to readers of the Alpine Journal.

The sources I have used in writing this article are listed in Reference 1; they include Townson's own account of his visit to the Tatra. In the last few years, many articles have been published on the history of mountaineering in the Tatra and most of them have used some basic material derived from these books.

But who was Robert Townson? His name is not to be found in the standard encyclopaedias. However, in *The Concise Dictionary of National Biography, Part I: From the Beginnings to 1900* (Oxford University Press, 1961) there is a short notice about him: 'traveller and mineralogist; M.D. Göttingen, 1795; chief work "The Philosophy of Mineralogy", 1798'. More details are given in the (main) *Dictionary of National Biography*, and by J Szaflarski in his book *The Exploration of the Tatra*.¹

Townson was probably born in Yorkshire, and studied in Edinburgh under Alexander Monro. He graduated in natural history, so botany, zoology and geology would have been of especial interest to him. After his journey to Hungary in 1793 he studied medical science at Göttingen, where he obtained his doctorate in 1795. His later vicissitudes are not known, but perhaps he was working at a Scottish university.²

Townson was not the first explorer of the Tatra. It is likely that shepherds and mountain men, mostly hunters, were in the area long before it was visited by tourists and scientists. The northern, Polish, side was settled much later than the southern, Slovak, side; therefore the first trips into these mountains were undertaken from the south, often from Kežmarok, an important town in the region of Spiš, at the foot of the Tatra. Many of the early visitors to the Tatra lived and worked in Kežmarok.

The earliest information about a tourist trip into these mountains dates from the 16th century: in 1565 a Pole, Beata Laska (1515-1576), wife of the starost (noble civil servant) of the Spiš district, is thought to have visited the Kežmarskej Bielej Vody valley and the Green Lake, situated in the upper part of this valley at a height of 1545m. In 1615 the 'highest peak' was climbed by

David Frölich (1595–1648), a teacher with the honoured title of 'imperial-royal mathematician and practical astronomer of the Hungarian Kingdom'. Historians argue about which peak was his goal: Mt Lomnický (2632m), Mt Slavkovský (2452m) or Mt Kežmarský (2558m), but WH Paryski has no doubt that he attained the last of these.

Another person who lived in Kežmarok was Christian Augustini ab Hortis (1598–1650). He hiked through the Tatra, but no details of his trips are known. As a physician he was interested in collecting resin from the dwarf mountain-pines (pinus mughus) and stone-pines (pinus cembra) which he used as a medicine.

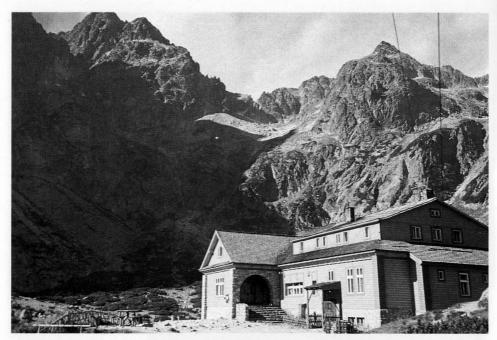
In 1683 a book was published, entitled Ungarischer Oder Dacianischer Simplicissimus, Vorstellend Seinen wunderlichen Lebens-Lauff, und sonderliche Begebenheiten gethaner Raisen, Nebenst Wahrhafter Beschreibung dess vormals im Flor gestandenen und offters verunruhigten Urgerlands.... It included a diary of climbing on Mt Kežmarský in 1654. The Simplicissimus of Hungary, whose identity was kept secret, was Daniel Speer (1636–1707) from Silesia, musician and composer.

The next significant explorer of the Tatra was Georg Buchholz Sen (1643–1724) who climbed Mt Slavkovský in 1664. In 1719 he wrote a description of the High Tatra, Das weit und breit erschollene Ziepser-Schnee-Gebürg, which was not published until 1899. It concerned the area around Mt Kriváň (2494m), but his opinion that the Tatra could be seen from Lowicz – a town about 80km west of Warsaw – is complete nonsense, of course. Soon afterwards, between 1736 and 1742, Mathias Bel (1684–1749) published in Vienna a description of the Western Tatra in Notitia Hungariae novea historica-geographica.

Other important figures in the exploration of the Tatra were Georg Buchholz jr (1688–1737), teacher in Kežmarok, who drafted the first panorama of the Tatra, and his brother Jakob (1696–1754?). Jakob Buchholz sent samples of mountain rocks and minerals to Vienna in 1746; this collection attracted the personal interest of the Emperor of Austria, who set up a scientific commission which visited the Tatra in 1751, with Jakob Buchholz as guide.

At the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th, many well-known scientists and travellers explored the Tatra, among them the Rev Andreas Jonas Czirbesz (1732–1813), Balthasar Hacquet (1739?–1815), the Pole Stanislaw Staszic (1755–1826) who climbed Mt Lomnický in 1802 or 1804, Johann Asbóth (1768–1823), the brothers Genersich, the Rev Thomas Mauksch (1749–1832), known as the leading expert on the Tatra in his time (he accompanied Townson, too) and the Swede Göran Wahlenberg (1780–1851). The visit, between 1766 and 1768, of an unusual character, Friar Cyprian from Červený Kláštor (Red Abbey) in the Pieninys, is also worth mentioning: this legendary constructor of an early type of hang-glider may actually have used it himself to fly over the Tatra.

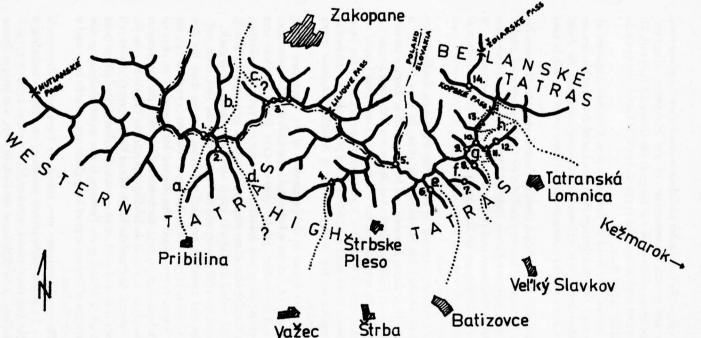
Two of the above-mentioned men visited the Tatra before Townson's trip. The Rev A J Czirbesz subsequently published two papers including a description of the first documented ascent of Mt Kriváň in 1772 or 1773. B Hacquet, well-known as an explorer of the Eastern Alps, was born in France



53. The refuge at the Green Lake and view into Vel'ka Zmrzlá Valley. In the background Mt Pysny (2623m), Baranie Pass and Baranie rohy (2526m) and (R) Mt Cierny (2434m). (J W Gajewski) (p 110)



54. Mt Bystra (2258m) and Pyszna Pasture in the upper Kościeliska Valley (Western Tatras). (J W Gajewski) (p 110)



....Townson's routes in the Tatra; △ the peaks attained by him. Valleys: a – Račková, b – Kościeliska, c – Miętusia, d – Kamenistá, e – Velická, f – Vel'ka Studená, g – Malá Studená & Five Spiš Lakes, h – Kežmarskej Bielej vody; peaks: 1 – Starorobociański, 2 – Bystra, 3 – Red Peaks, 4 – Kriváň, 5 – Rysy, 6 – Gerlachovský, 7 – Slavkovský, 8 – Prostredny hrot, 9 – L'adovy, 10 – Baranie rohy, 11 – Lomnický, 12 – Kežmarský, 13 – Jahňaci, 14 – Havran.

and was a physician to the French and Austrian armies. He was also a professor of surgery, anatomy and natural history, and a lecturer at the universities of Ljubljana, Lvov, Cracow and Vienna. He travelled all over the Carpathians and published in Nuremberg his observations entitled Neueste physikalisch-politische Reisen in den Jahren 1787–1795 durch die dacischen und sarmatischen oder nördlichen Karpathen. In 1792 he spent some time on the northern side of the Tatra, travelling from Nowy Targ to Witów village and to the Western Tatra, climbing Mt Kriváň twice and visiting the main areas of the Polish Tatra: the Five Polish Lakes valley and the Morskie Oko Lake. In fact, he was better known as an explorer of the Carpathians in general rather than of the Tatra, where his observations were mainly concerned with mining activities.

Robert Townson recorded his trip to the Tatra in a book entitled *Travels to Hungary*, with a short account of Vienna in the year 1793. The book, which was 'illustrated with a map and sixteen other copper-plates', was published in London in 1797; a translation by C Cantwell, Voyage en Hongrie, was published in Paris in 1798–99.

Townson's book describes his impressions and experiences in travelling from Italy, where he spent the winter of 1792, to Budapest (May 1793), to the Matra mountains (north-east of the Hungarian capital), Debrecen, Oradea (now a town in Romania), the Tokay Valley (famous for fine wines), Košice in Slovakia and the area of Slovenský kras. Along the Hornád River he came to Levoča, a town not far from the Tatra, where he was arrested as a Jacobin. Some time later, luckily free again, he arrived at the foot of the Tatra. Unfortunately, owing to bad weather, he had to stay in the Spiš villages and in Kežmarok.

The first trip Townson made was to the Green Lake, along the same trail which B Laska had followed almost 200 years earlier. He arrived there after three hours' walk, saw traces of a bear, and started some botanical experiments which were interrupted by a change in the weather. During his second trip to the Green Lake he saw much more: his book gives descriptions of the Iron Gate (known today as the Rocky Gate) and fascinating views of the limestone rocks of the Belanské Tatra, the range situated to the north-east of the High Tatra. As a naturalist Townson was especially interested in this 'green' area of the Belanské where the flora was so much richer than in the inhospitable granite rocks of the High Tatra. He spent a night camping near the lake, among dwarf mountain-pines; his guides made a fire and told him stories about treasure-seekers and ruby jewels to be found at the top of Jastrabia veža (the Hawk's Crag, 2139m, a peak towering over the lake and known in Townson's time as Ruby Crag).

Next day, he 'ascended by a small cascade into a higher valley, where still more snow was lying'. It was the Vel'ká Zmrzlá valley, known as the Wild Valley in the Polish language. And it really is a wild valley, hanging over the Green Lake. This beautiful cirque is surrounded by the walls of high peaks: Kežmarský, Lomnický, Pyšny, Baranie rohy and Čierny, which descend steeply to Copper Dale, the site of copper mines in the 18th century and earlier. The snow-field in the upper part of the cirque was supposed by some authors to form a small glacier, but this is not true. On 6 August Townson decided to climb Mt Lomnický from Copper Dale on its northern side, in the company of a

highlander guide. An approaching storm and a stone avalanche thwarted their plan, but they attained a height of almost 2000m and were the first climbers in the history of Tatra mountaineering to attempt this mountain from the north.

After climbing alone in the Belanské Tatra, where his guide refused to accompany him, Townson was joined by another guide, Hans Gross, and they organized (on 9 August) a trip to Mt Jahňaci (2229m), then known as the Weisseespitze. This peak is easily reached by a marked trail today, one of the few in this part of the Slovak Tatra National Park. They took a similar route through the Červená valley (the second known passage into this valley), over the Kolové pass (2097m) and along the SW ridge of Mt Jahňaci. This ridge is now known as Townson's ridge (Townsonov hrebeň), and thousands of hikers follow in his footsteps every year. The way back led over the Kopské pass (1749m) which divides the High and Belanské Tatra, but the details of their route are not known.

After a short rest in Kežmarok, Townson arranged his next trip on 14 August; he hired a horse and asked two guides to accompany him. By the time they had reached what was probably Hrebienok (today a funicular goes there), Townson had satisfied himself that the horse was useless and sent it back down. Next day the hikers came to the 'koleba' – a hollow under a big rock, situated in the Malá Studená valley. While sheltering there Townson suffered a personal 'tragedy' – his servant broke the bottle of alcohol! – and he met three treasure-seekers who had been digging for 12 years without success.

Townson also visited the upper part of this valley, known as the Valley of the Five Lakes of Spiš, surrounded by Mt Prostredný hrot, L'adový, Baranie rohy, Pyšny and Lomnický. The next morning, because of bad weather, he decided to send his servant down for provisions (brandy and wine being top of the list), while he himself continued to the rocky ridge dividing the Malá Studená and Veľká Studená valleys. This ridge is of particular interest for climbers to the top of Prostredný hrot (2440m), but Townson visited only the lower part of the ridge. Did he reach the pass of Sedlo za Oštepmi? He noted only that it was a precipitous ridge.

The top of Mt Lomnický, the goal of Townson's trip, was not attained on this occasion; and the chances are that Jacob Fabri sen (1740–1817) reached the top before Townson. Then, on 16 August, when the weather improved a little, he and two highlander guides started to climb from the south-west. After two hours' walk from the 'koleba' they were on the Lomnické pass (2190m), at the foot of the S ridge of Mt Lomnický. Unfortunately clouds covered the pass, there was no view and both guides wanted to go back; but a drop of vodka changed their minds. The hikers reached the top by a difficult and complicated route: it was probably the trail known later among Polish climbers as 'over Wrótka route', parallel to the S ridge of the mountain.

Townson, equipped as usual with a barometer, decided to determine the height of the peak. His measurement, 2634m above sea-level, was very precise—the accepted height is 2632m. On the way back clouds covered the mountains and the splendid panorama could not be seen. Today this view is admired by passengers on the cable-railway from Tatranská Lomnica.

Our hero finally left Kežmarok on 20 August. He passed through Veľký

Slavkov (where he met the Rev T Mauksch); Batizovce, leading to the big Velická valley at the foot of Mt Gerlachovský (the highest peak in the Tatra, though not known as such at that time); and other villages situated along the foot of the Tatra: Štrba, Štrbské Pleso and Važec.

From this last village Townson prepared for his next trip – to the top of Mt Kriváň. At the start he was accompanied by the Rev T Mauksch, the Rev J Ursing, his servant and a guide; but, after a night spent in a miner's hut, the wind was strong and only Townson, the servant and – without enthusiasm – the guide started for the summit. The guide later maintained that he had never been on Mt Kriváň, but that was not true: on the top he looked for coins left there by other travellers whom he had accompanied before Townson. Their route lay on the south side of the mountain, where today there are marked trails, easy and monotonous.

Townson's book also contains recollections of his trip to the Polish side of the range. He crossed the Western Tatra and reached the Kościeliska valley, where he visited a few mines; and probably also the Miętusia valley, since his report on the geology of the Red Peaks which rise above this valley is remarkably complete and accurate. On 6 September, after visits to salt mines in Wieliczka and Bochnia and a visit to Cracow, he started his journey back south. On 10 September he was seen in the village of Pribylina, at the entrance to the Račkova valley in the Western Tatra, and in October he was in Bratislava. By November he was in Vienna and his historic trip was over. I believe that it played a significant part in the story of mountaineering and scientific observation in the Tatra mountains.

The book about this trip was not Townson's only work. He was the author of geological and botanical observations which had never been made before. A short chapter of his book deals with the life of shepherds in the mountain pastures. For many years his measurements of the heights of the peaks caused Mt Lomnický to be accepted as the highest top in the Tatra. We have to admire his persistence in the face of difficulties and hardship, bearing in mind especially that the weather in the summer of 1793 was poor and not favourable for mountaineering.

It is noteworthy that Townson chose for his trips the areas in the Tatra with the most fascinating scenery, in particular rocky cirques surrounded by the inaccessible walls of the highest peaks, which even today are considered difficult ascents for both walkers and climbers.

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