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# Pioneers of the Paine

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(Plates 72-75)

The growing popularity of the Southern Andes as a new area for mountain exploration, in particular the spectacular peaks and towers of the Paine massif, prompts curiosity about the early explorers of this range. Until the 1880s it had remained virtually unseen by European eyes, though for 200 years Indian hunters of the Aonikenk and Tehuelche tribes had rounded up the wild horses (*baguales*) in the area, and given the range the name of *Paine*, or 'blue' in their language.

True, Magellan had sailed round the southern edge as the first navigator of the Strait that bears his name. As a result of the Anglo-Spanish wars, fought out in the waters off the W coast of Chile in the 18th century, and the British interest in promoting and protecting trade with the breakaway republic of South America in the early 19th century, the fjords and islands of the SW coast of Chile are peppered with names like Cockburn Channel, Nelson Strait, Stokes Bay, Langford Gulf, Queen Adelaide Archipelago and Wellington Island. The hydrographical surveys carried out by the voyages of HMS *Beagle* in 1825-26 and in 1831-34 penetrated further into the fjords; Lieutenant Skyring of the *Beagle* went as far as the inlet that bears his name, also naming the largest, outer Sound after Admiral Ottway (spelt with one 't' in Spanish), Commander-in-Chief, South Atlantic Station.

Captain Robert Fitzroy, on his second *Beagle* voyage, had Charles Darwin attached to him as naturalist. Together they took a boat up the Rio Santa Cruz from the E coast of Patagonia to a point 140 miles from the Atlantic and, they estimated, 60 miles from the nearest part of the Pacific. This must have been some way short of Lago Argentino, since neither mentions sighting this large sheet of water which would have made their painful journey westwards much easier. On 29 April 1834 Darwin records that they 'hailed with joy the snowy summits of the Cordilleras, as they were seen occasionally peeping through their dusky envelope of clouds'.<sup>1</sup> On 3 May, as rations were running short and the going upstream became even more difficult, they were forced to turn back. 'We looked at [these grand mountains] with regret, for it was evident we had not time to reach them. We were obliged to imagine their nature & grandeur, instead of standing as we had hoped, on one of their pinnacles and looking down on the plain below.'<sup>2</sup> This was the first British sighting of the Paine: they identified the mountain later named Mount Stokes after Captain Pringle Stokes, the former captain of the *Beagle*, who had, as Fitzroy records, 'ascended the rapid current as far as his heavy boat could be taken',<sup>3</sup> some six or seven years earlier. (He committed suicide out of desperation at the desolate climate.) His namesake John Lort Stokes was the surveyor who accompanied the 1834 expedition on the Rio Cruz trip and took over command of the *Beagle* in 1837.



72. *The Cleopatra Needles*, sketch by Julius Beerbohm.  
(From *Across Patagonia* by Lady Dixie, 1880.) (p222)



73. Torres del Paine (R) from Lago Azul, with (L)  
Cerro Almirante Nieto, Nov 1990. (*Edward Peck*) (p222)

Fitzroy's own name was to be given to the higher of the two sharp-pointed towers which the natives call 'Chaltel'. These were sighted by the Spanish explorer Viedma as early as 1780, some 100 miles north of the Paine. All these explorations had taken place in the area round about the Paine and no European had yet penetrated into the mountain range itself. So, improbable though it may seem, Lady Florence Dixie, sister of the Marquess of Queensberry (of the 'Rules') and an evident student of Coleridge, may well have been justified in her exuberant claim that 'We were the first that ever burst into that silent sea.'<sup>4</sup> This could have been the E end of Lake Nordenskjöld, but this is uncertain. Lady Dixie's book *Across Patagonia*, published in 1880, contains delightful engravings by Julius Beerbohm, of which two are reproduced (Plates 72 and 74), together with my own photographs taken from similar viewpoints (Plates 73 and 75). These two engravings are remarkably accurate but the 'silent sea', depicted in a third engraving, is difficult to identify.

This 1879 expedition by the Marquess of Queensberry, with his sister and her husband and guided by two *baqueanos* or horse-hunters, may seem to have been largely devoted to shooting *guanaco*, but it was certainly the first tourist foray into the Paine. According to Lady Dixie's rather confusing route description, the party seems to have approached the range from the east, to the south of the Baguales range. They must then have followed the N bank of the Lago Azul, to obtain the splendid view of the Torres del Paine, which she terms 'Cleopatra's Needles'. Beerbohm's sketch is remarkably accurate when compared with my photograph taken from the same viewpoint in November 1990 (Plates 72 and 73).

Thwarted by 'an enormous cataract, which, half hidden in the trees, left scarcely any part of itself visible'<sup>5</sup> (presumably the Gran Salto del Paine), they proceeded above Lake Pehoe to drop to the lower Rio Paine where it joins the Rio Grey to become the Rio Serrano. Now the site of the Administrative Centre of the National Park, this was evidently Lady Dixie's 'Wild Horse Glen' (Plate 74), where horses still graze in a semi-wild state on the flats. It is interesting to contrast Beerbohm's dramatic rendering of what must be the Cuernos in the background with my own photograph taken from much the same viewpoint (Plate 75). The wild horses are alleged to be descendants of the five mares and seven stallions released by Pedro Mendoza in 1535 in the Argentine pampas, where they multiplied and spread southwards. The engravings made from these sketches were done by the firm of Whympier and Pearson: the strong stylistic similarity to the dramatic engravings so familiar from *Scrambles Amongst the Alps* suggests the hand of Edward Whympier, the engraver, at work.

More serious explorers followed: in 1895-96 Otto Nordenskjöld, a Swedish scientist, approached the Paine from the north, naming Lago Dickson after the Swedish Baron who sponsored his expedition. Nordenskjöld took three days to struggle ten miles through thickets of *Fagus antarctica* (Antarctic beech) to reach the 'deep water-filled depression about 3 miles in length'<sup>6</sup> which now bears his name.

The Salesian missionary Father Alberto de Agostini is the person to whom mountaineers should be most grateful for the exploration of the Paine and much

of the Southern Andes. He is little known in English-speaking countries, probably because his explorations were made before or during the Second World War and his works published either in Spanish or his native Italian. Certainly his remarkable book *Andes Patagónicos*<sup>7</sup> deserves full recognition as a mountaineering classic. While passing through Punta Arenas when returning from the Paine in November 1990, I visited the Salesian Museum and was struck by seeing the good father's rope, four-foot ice-axe and other climbing mementoes. I determined to find out more about this enterprising priest, who must be numbered among the great Italian mountaineering clerics.

Alberto de Agostini was born in 1883 at Pollone in the Biella district of northern Italy, almost within sight of Monte Rosa, which was one of his first climbs; his twin passions were mountaineering and photography. These did not stand in the way of Agostini being ordained in 1909 and posted to the Salesian Mission in Punta Arenas. The remarkable photographs and extensive panoramas reproduced in *Andes Patagónicos* show him to be a worthy successor to the great alpine photographer Vittorio Sella. Most were taken from summits but in 1937 Agostini did make two aerial sorties in a single-engined aircraft. His special interest in the Sarmiento range in Tierra del Fuego was satisfied by his own ascent of Monte Olivia in 1913 and, 43 years later, by his involvement in organising the Maffei expedition to make the first ascent of Monte Sarmiento itself. Agostini's greatest triumph was to make the ascent of San Lorenzo on the Patagonian ice cap at the age of 60.

In 1913 Agostini's first expedition to the Paine brought him over the pass behind the Gran Paine (now known as John Gardner Pass) on a circuit of the massif. His missionary duties then took him away for 15 years during which he made a detailed study of the Tehuelche Indians. He paid two further visits to the Paine, in 1929 and 1937, traversing the col between the southernmost Torre (later named Torre Agostini) and the easternmost peak, known as Paine Chico (later renamed Almirante Nieto by the first climbers, the Germans Hans Teufel and Stefan Zuck, by the NNE ridge in 1937). Agostini was accompanied by professional guides, usually compatriots from the Val d'Aosta. Before he died in Turin in 1960 Agostini inspired the wealthy Italian industrialist and mountaineer Guido Monzino to take an interest in the Paine.

Monzino led a 17-member expedition to the Torres in 1957-58. Four climbers with familiar Aostan names – Bich, Pession, Carrel, Pelissier – succeeded in the first ascent of the most northerly of the three towers by the S ridge from the Brèche Bich. Monzino's interest, including the purchase of half a million acres as the genesis of the National Park, more or less monopolised the area for Italian climbers. This made all the more ironic the dramatic events of 16-17 January 1963. The successful first ascent of the Central Tower was strangely reminiscent of what happened on the Matterhorn on 14 July 1865, when Whymper's party beat Carrel's to the top.

Barry Page's party, consisting of Don Whillans, Chris Bonington, Ian Clough and John Streetly, laid siege to the Central Tower (2800m), only to find that it had been double-booked by the Chilean authorities for an Italian expedition. Struggles with Antarctic beech and the usual fierce winds of Patagonia delayed both parties for several weeks after Christmas 1962. But on 16 January 1963,



74. *The Wild Horse Glen*, sketch by Julius Beerbohm.  
(From *Across Patagonia* by Lady Dixie, 1880.) (p222)



75. Horses grazing with Cuernos del Paine behind,  
Nov 1990. (Edward Peck) (p222)

after various attempts, Chris Bonington and Don Whillans made the successful first ascent of the Central Tower of Paine from the notch between it and the N Tower. They spent a chilly night on the shoulder, passing, on their way down, the Italian party, who reached the summit on 17 January. Few words were exchanged, more from language difficulties than disgruntlement; but with Ian Clough off making the third ascent of the North Tower (2600m), the place was, as Chris Bonington observed, looking more like the Chamonix aiguilles than a virgin peak at the end of the world.<sup>8</sup> Don Whillans deduced from the Italians' radio link with Rome that their claim to the Central Tower was being supported by the Pope. He would have been more correct to guess Monzino!

The Italians, led by Armando Aste, achieved some satisfaction by making the first ascent of the Southern Tower (2850m) on 9 February 1963 and naming it 'Torre Alberto de Agostini'.

Many subsequent first ascents have been achieved by mountaineers from Italy, Japan, South Africa, America, Argentina, Chile and Britain on the spectacular, wind-swept faces and ridges of this remote and unusual range. As recently as January 1992 Noel Craine, Paul Pritchard, Sean Smith and Simon Yates made the first ascent of *El Regalo de Mowana*, a 1200m 34 pitch route on the E face of the Central Tower.

## REFERENCES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1 Charles Darwin, *Diary of the Voyage of HMS 'Beagle'*. Edited from the MS by Nora Barlow. Cambridge University Press, 224, 1933.
- 2 *Ibid*, 224.
- 3 Robert Fitzroy, *A Narrative of the Voyage of HMS Beagle*. Folio Society, 189, 200, 1977.
- 4 Lady Florence Dixie, *Across Patagonia*. With illustrations from sketches by Julius Beerbohm, engraved by Whymper and Pearson. London, Richard Bentley, 198, 1880.
- 5 *Ibid*, 178.
- 6 Otto Nordenskjöld, 'A Journey in South-Western Patagonia'. *Geographical Journal*, Vol X, 403, 1897.
- 7 Alberto de Agostini, *Andes Patagónicos*. Buenos Aires, 1941. Second edition, 1945.
- 8 C J S Bonington, 'The Central Tower of Paine'. *AJ68*, 179, 1963.

For an account of Agostini's life and a detailed record of all first ascents and other early climbs in the Paine, see: Gino Buscaini and Silvia Metzeltin, *Patagonia. Terra Magica per Alpinisti e Viaggiatore* (in Italian). dall'Oglio, Italy.

For further accounts of Bonington/Whillans' ascent of Central Tower, see: Don Whillans and Alick Ormerod, *Don Whillans: Portrait of a Mountaineer*. Heinemann, 1971; Chris Bonington, *The Next Horizon*. Gollancz, 1973.