
SUE HARPER

Other Annapurnas

Louis Lachenal's diary entry for 3 June 1950 reads: 'Finally, we are there. A corniced snow arête with three summits, one higher than the others. It's the summit of Annapurna.' Annapurna. The first 8000-metre peak ever to be climbed.

When Louis Lachenal and Maurice Herzog became the first men to stand on the summit, they were assured of instant fame. This was an important victory for the French, who had never been to Everest, and for a team of climbers which comprised France's best – Lionel Terray, Gaston Rébuffat, Louis Lachenal, all three professional mountain guides, together with Jean Couzy, Marcel Schatz and Maurice Herzog who was the expedition leader. Maurice Herzog wrote the official expedition book *Annapurna* which has become so well known and with it he too became famous.

Louis Lachenal who stood with him on Annapurna's summit is less well known, has been less celebrated, except in Alpine climbing circles where his name is a legend. However, the publication of a new book has changed all that. In fact, it has created a storm in France with headlines in the newspaper *Le Monde* provoking letters from Maurice Herzog and Gaston Rébuffat's wife, Françoise. And now the name of Louis Lachenal is perhaps more well known than it has ever been. So what is all this about? One could say that it is about putting the record straight, but to really understand we have to look back at something that started a long time ago.

Lionel Terray and Gaston Rébuffat both wrote books about their climbing adventures, which were translated into English nearly forty years ago. Consequently, the names of these two climbers have become well known in English-speaking countries. In 1955 Louis Lachenal was also planning to write a book and had begun to collect together the diaries kept throughout his life with a view to doing this.

Unfortunately, he was to die before he could set pen to paper. On 25 November of that year he set off with his friend Jean Pierre Payot to ski the Vallée Blanche. It was very early in the season, but Lachenal had already skied it on both the previous two days. Jean Pierre was skiing in Lachenal's tracks when suddenly his friend disappeared. A snow bridge had collapsed beneath him and he fell into a very deep crevasse. By the time the rescue team finally reached him, Lachenal was found to be dead, his neck broken in the fall.

After his tragic death, Lachenal's friends decided that a fitting memorial would be to publish the book he was planning to write. The task of putting

the book together, using material from Lachenal's diaries, was given to Gérard Herzog, Maurice's brother, who had known and climbed with Lachenal all his life. The book called *Carnets du Vertige* was published in Lachenal's name in 1956. Unfortunately, it was never translated into English and has therefore been accessible only to those with an understanding of the French language. Consequently, many people will not realise what a defining role Louis Lachenal played in post-war alpinism, unless of course they have read Terray's book *Conquistadors of the Useless*.

Lachenal and Terray did many of their greatest climbs together and were thought to be the greatest partnership of their time. Their exploits are legendary. Together they made the second ascent of the East Face of the Aiguille du Moine, the third ascent of the North Face of Les Droites in 8½ hours, the fourth ascent of the Walker Spur, which they would have overcome in one day if they had not been caught in a storm near the top, the Frendo Spur in 5½ hours from the cable car, the second ascent of the North Face of the Eiger in 50 hours and the sixth ascent of the NE Face of the Piz Badile in 7½ hours, which was three times faster than any previous ascent.

The latter climb was done in 1949 at a time when climbing in the Himalaya was much talked about by French alpinists. Having climbed the two hardest routes in the Alps, the Walker Spur and the North Face of the Eiger, Lachenal felt that Himalayan climbing was a logical progression, so when he was invited to join the French Himalayan Expedition in 1950 he accepted with alacrity. And on 3 June of that year he stood on the summit of Annapurna, the highest mountain ever climbed. It should have been the culmination of a brilliant climbing career, but for Lachenal it was the start of the nightmare he had most feared.

All the time they were on the mountain, Lachenal's greatest dread was frostbite. Like the rest of the expedition, he dearly wanted to climb Annapurna, but he did not want to take risks that would jeopardise the rest of his climbing career. Above all, he did not want to end up like Raymond Lambert, the guide from Geneva who had lost all his toes from frostbite while climbing in the Alps. Lachenal lived for climbing, especially climbing in his beloved Aiguilles de Chamonix. For him, Annapurna was just another climb, the biggest ever and for his country, but it was still a climb like any other. The risks had to be weighed up. In the end Herzog and Lachenal took the risks and reached the summit. But each paid a price, and Lachenal's fear was realised. As a result of their climb on 3 June, both he and Herzog suffered dreadful frostbite injuries, Herzog losing all his fingers and toes and Lachenal losing all his toes. And it is the events of this fateful and victorious day which are now in dispute.

Maurice Herzog was commissioned to write the official expedition book. The day before they left for India, the rest of the team were forced to sign a document giving up the right to publish anything about the expedition, in

words or photographs. Gaston Rébuffat later mentioned this to his wife in a letter he wrote from the Himalaya: 'Just as you can't take a child's Christmas present away from him, nothing would have prevented us from going.' Despite the injustice of this contract which all the team members had to sign, the story of Annapurna has only ever been heard from Maurice Herzog's point of view. When *Carnets du Vertige* was published in 1956 there was a chapter about the expedition. However, the book was written by Gérard Herzog in collaboration with his brother Maurice and Lucien Devies, who was president of the French Mountaineering Federation, and any parts of Lachenal's Annapurna diary extracts which threw anything other than an honourable light of the expedition were left out. But no one realised this until recently.

A few years ago, Michel Guérin, a publisher of mountaineering books in Chamonix who is himself a keen climber, befriended Lachenal's son, Jean-Claude. As a result of this friendship, Guérin was given access to the original manuscript of the book and realised that here was an untold story. It was at once evident how much material concerning Annapurna had been suppressed from the original version of *Carnets du Vertige* and Guérin offered to publish a new unexpurgated version. It was a difficult decision for Jean-Claude to make. Herzog, now the only surviving member of the expedition climbing team, had been like a guardian to him throughout his fatherless childhood and he realised the book would probably cause much controversy and pain.

However, he eventually agreed, wanting the world to know the truth. So a new edition of *Carnets du Vertige* was published. It was in French, of course, this time in hardback, whereas the original edition was only a paperback, and profusely illustrated with black and white photographs, maps and sketches. And this book tells the story in Lachenal's words of what happened on the day he and Maurice Herzog climbed to the summit of Annapurna.

On the summit day, they left their tents at dawn and climbed upwards into freezing conditions. When Lachenal realised he could no longer feel his feet, he wanted to go down, but this was not part of Herzog's plan. There is no dispute about the fact that Lachenal was afraid of frostbite. In his book *Annapurna*, Maurice Herzog writes:

Whenever we halted, we stamped our feet hard. Lachenal went as far as to take off one boot which was a bit tight; he was in terror of frostbite. 'I don't want to be like Lambert,' he said.

Then, at yet another halt:

Lachenal continued to complain of his feet. 'I can't feel anything. I think I'm beginning to get frostbite.' And once again he undid his boot.

When Lachenal said yet again: 'We're in danger of having frostbitten feet. Do you think it's worth it?' Herzog admitted that he realised frostbite was a very real danger and asked himself whether it was worth taking such risks. Suddenly, Lachenal grabbed Herzog and said: 'If I go back what will you do?' Maurice Herzog writes:

I had made up my mind irrevocably. Today we were consecrating an ideal, and no sacrifice was too great.

In answer to Lachenal's question he replied, 'I should go on by myself.' And so Lachenal said he would follow him. Which he did and as a consequence paid the terrible price of losing all his toes and ultimately his climbing career. So why did he do it?

A passage in the new edition of *Carnets du Vertige* offers an explanation. Lachenal says the decision about whether or not to turn back was just

... one of the normal decisions one takes on a big climb in the Alps. I knew my feet were freezing, that if I went to the summit I would lose them. This climb was like any other to me, higher than in the Alps, but nothing more. ... I didn't owe the young people of France my feet. I wanted to go down. I asked Maurice what he would do if I did. He said he would go on. It wasn't for me to judge his reasons; alpinism is a very personal thing. But I considered that if he went on alone, he would not come back. It was for him and for him alone that I did not turn around. This summit climb was not about national prestige. It was about a climbing partnership.

Lachenal had a choice. He desperately wanted to go down to save his feet, but felt that if he let Herzog continue to the summit alone he would never return. He couldn't do that. He was a professional guide, the more experienced climber. So he carried on, with frozen feet. Once on the summit, Lachenal wanted to turn around immediately but Herzog seemed caught up in his own euphoria with no thought at all to frozen hands or feet. Herzog describes this in *Annapurna*:

Our mission was accomplished. How wonderful life would now become!

From Lachenal's point of view this could not have been further from the truth. For him, life in the future could only be made possible by descending immediately. Herzog's narrative continues:

'Well, what about going down?' Lachenal shook me. What were his own feelings? Did he simply think he had finished another climb, as in the Alps? Did he think one could just go down again like that, with nothing more to it?

When Lachenal repeated that they must go down at once, Herzog realised that the weather was changing and said of Lachenal:

He was right. His was the reaction of the mountaineer who knows his own domain. ... Lachenal stamped his feet; he felt them freezing. I felt mine freezing too, but paid little attention. The highest mountain to be climbed by man lay under our feet!

So Herzog admitted that Lachenal was the more experienced climber, the only one of them who realised the danger they were in, but in saying that he paid little attention to his freezing feet, he demonstrated once again his belief that 'no sacrifice was too great'. A sacrifice which Lachenal also chose to make, but for different reasons, and for whom it was to be too great.

In a new biography of Gaston Rébuffat, written by Yves Ballu, we also now have Rébuffat's version of the summit day which he heard from Lachenal. Rébuffat thought that Lachenal's loyalty to his climbing partner almost certainly stemmed from the fact that he was a professional guide and the more experienced climber, and from the unwritten rule that a guide never abandons his client. And on the summit, Rébuffat considered that Lachenal had almost certainly saved Herzog from the consequence of a dangerous euphoria which was most probably due to hypoxia. Rébuffat wrote:

Maurice seemed to be in ecstasy. Taking leave of his senses, or at least losing all sense of reality, he started to fall complacently into a sort of happiness, or rapture, at a time when a sense of reality should have been primordial: he was at 8,000 metres, it was cold, it was windy, his feet were frozen, his hands as well, and his whole body was cold. Lachenal was aware of all this. What is the point of reaching a summit and then losing your feet? His repeated observations of this fact were to no avail, he had to turn round and start descending himself before Maurice became aware of what was happening and followed.

And Rébuffat concluded:

Nothing has been written about Annapurna except the official story, authorised with the blessing of, or after it has been censured by, the Himalayan Committee.

That is until now.

There is a saying that the truth will out. It might have taken nearly 50 years, but it is now available for all to see in *Carnets du Vertige* by Louis Lachenal, Editions Guérin, Chamonix, 1996.