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The 1933 Piz Roseg Disaster and EW Powell

This year is the 75th anniversary of the death of four Eton schoolmasters, EV Slater, EW Powell, HEE Howson and CR White-Thomson on Piz Roseg in the Engadine. On 17 August 1933 they left the Tschierva hut with the intention of climbing the Eselgrat on Piz Roseg but did not return. The following day, two guided parties climbing the same route were surprised to find three axes in a couloir above the Sella glacier. From the highest axe, a deep, narrow furrow ran down the gully and out of sight. Nothing further could be seen. The two parties continued to the summit and on their descent saw two bodies and returned to the Tschierva hut and raised the alarm. On 19 August, a search party of 19 guides found the four bodies still roped together and brought them down to Pontresina.¹ In 2006 a retired Engadine guide, Herr Kirle, could recall, as a boy of 12, witnessing this sad procession of guides and a horse-drawn cart returning to the village.

The accident could have been due to stonefall or a slip. Wet afternoon snow would have made the slide of the party, once started, impossible to control. Three days later, the men were buried in the grounds of the Santa Maria Kirche in Pontresina, each coffin carried by four guides. In 1999, as permitted by Swiss law, the headstones were taken down, although the plot where the men are buried may still be identified.

Of the four men, three, Howson, Slater and Powell, were members of the Alpine Club. This seems to have been the only occasion when three members of the Club have lost their lives as a result of a single climbing accident. The same three men were also housemasters at Eton. Claude Elliott, later President of the Alpine Club, had just assumed the headship of the school and was immediately faced with the task of replacing these men and putting the risks of mountaineering in context to the school community. Elliott gave an address in the College Chapel on 24 September 1933 and to the question: 'But, it may be asked, why should men climb mountains at all, why endanger lives that others have need of?' he responded:

It [mountaineering] is a method of seeking, and of making touch with, something outside us and infinitely above us. They [mountaineers] find it above everything through a supremely intensified appreciation of all that is beautiful in their surroundings, through the vision of distant ranges, through the view from close at hand of rock tower and ice slope either gleaming in the sun or seen through rifts of cloud when every step is a struggle ...²



164. EW Powell, *Wetterhorn*. Watercolour, undated. (Private collection)

There is a memorial to the four men in the ante-chapel at Eton and the boys of Slater's house subscribed to a memorial tablet in the Cloister.

Eric Walter Powell (1886-1933) was perhaps the most remarkable of the four men. At Trinity College, Cambridge he had been a distinguished oarsman, and a rowing Blue in 1906, 1907 and 1908. He won a Bronze medal in the 1908 Olympics. He returned to Eton in 1910 to teach French and German. At the outbreak of war in August 1914 he was an infantry officer, but by 1916 he was a squadron leader and later wing commander in the Royal Flying Corps. He returned to Eton in 1919 and spent a year (1920-1921) studying art in Paris with the intention that he should take on responsibility for the teaching of this subject.³

He only started climbing after the end of the war and visited Skye in 1919. He seems to have taken up Alpine mountaineering in 1922 with ascents of the Jungfrau, Wetterhorn and Schreckhorn and by 1925 he had climbed most of the Oberland peaks. He sometimes climbed with guides such as Quirin Zurbriggen and Heinrich Burgener but perhaps more often climbed guideless with Slater and Howson. He was elected to the Alpine Club in 1925 and amongst his supporters was Noel Odell.⁴ He also climbed in Norway, Corsica and the Pyrenees and visited the Engadine in 1930 or earlier.

A talented amateur artist, the earliest painting I can identify is a watercolour, *Windsor Castle from the River*, dated 1908. He favoured watercolour as a medium and only rarely painted in oil. He exhibited at Walker's Galleries in New Bond Street on seven occasions between 1920 and 1933 including at least 60 pictures in 1927 and 76 pictures in 1931. Amongst these were three pictures of Piz Roseg, *Piz Roseg from Piz Morteratsch*, *Piz Roseg from the Ice Nose of Piz Scerscen – Sunrise*, *The Biancograt and Piz Roseg*.⁵ Several of his pictures were exhibited at the Alpine Club in 1925 and 1930 including *Piz Roseg from the Morteratsch*.⁶ A memorial exhibition of 90 of his paintings was held at Walker's Galleries in November 1933. To mark the 50th anniversary of the disaster, an exhibition of 48 of his paintings was held at Eton in 1983. Amongst these were pictures of Windsor, Paris and Venice as well as scenes from the First World War, Wales, Scotland and the Alps.⁷ Eton College possesses a number of his watercolours and one oil. The Alpine Club has two watercolours; *Blumlisalphorn*, *Oberland* is reproduced in *The Artists of the Alpine Club*.⁷

Powell must have been very highly regarded at the Alpine Club, as well as at Eton. Irving chose to include part of the obituary notice for Powell in his anthology of mountain prose and verse.^{8,9} Shortly before the accident, White-Thomson wrote in a letter to his family from the Golf-Hotel des Alpes, Samedan, '*Eric is the same, ever steady ... leading up or coming down last. In the intervals he paints.*'¹⁰



165. Graves of EV Slater, EW Powell, HEE Howson and CR White-Thomson in the grounds of Santa Maria Kirche at Pontresina.

(By courtesy of Nigel Jaques)

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8. JD Hills, *AJ* 1934, 46, 185-187.
9. RLG Irving, *The Mountain Way*. Dent and Sons, London, 1938.
10. Correspondence held by Nigel Jaques.

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