

MICHEL BATAILLON AND ANDRÉ MOULIN

An Alpine Trophy – The Legendary Grépon Ice-axe

Historical Background

(by Michel Bataillon – translated and edited by Jerry Lovatt)

Until a few months ago, I only really associated the name Mummery with a crack on the Grépon and that of Burgener with the slabs of the Grand Dru. Then, at the end of the summer 2010, these names became forever tied to a venerable ice-axe, more than 100 years old. I saw it for the first time on 12 July 2010 in a mountain chalet in the village of Les Étages, a short distance down the valley from La Bélarde in the Oisans, where I had been taken by my friend and neighbour, André Moulin, a major collector of alpine literature and prints and member of the Alpine Club.

Albert Frederick Mummery was born in 1855 and started climbing in the Alps at the age of 16. However, it was in 1879 that his alpine career took a decisive turn when the Valaisan guide Alexander Burgener led him up a new route on the Matterhorn, the Zmutt Ridge. Ten years older than Mummery, Burgener was already famous: he had been Clinton Dent's guide on the Zinal Rothorn in 1873 and then made the first ascent of the Grand Dru, also with Dent, in 1878. He was well known for his physical strength and fortitude and for his understanding of alpine topography. In Chamonix they were at the same time envious and even a little fearful of him.

From then on, Mummery climbed with Burgener in the Valais, notably on the Furggen Ridge of the Matterhorn, and in the Chamonix Aiguilles. When they reached the summit of the Grands Charmoz on 15 July 1880, they were accompanied by Benedikt Venetz, a man who had been a worker on the Burgener farm in the Saas valley. Venetz, known as 'The Indian', was by all accounts an outstanding rock-climber.

One year later, on 30 July 1881, Mummery and Burgener made the first ascent of the Charpoua Face of the Aiguille Verte. Hard on the heels of this, with Venetz who had by then joined them, they made an attack on the Grépon, first of all by the Mer de Glace face and later by the Nantillons face, which led to the North summit, on which they placed an ice-axe. On 5 August 1881, their third attempt was successful: after returning to the North summit, they reached the highest point, the South summit (3482m) via the Vire à Bicyclette.

Reading Mummery in *My climbs in the Alps and Caucasus*, it is clear that each played his part. After having attempted in vain to throw a rope, they

decided to act according to 'the fair methods of honourable war'. It seemed to make sense that Venetz should be charged with the delicate final pitch. Standing first on Burgener's shoulders and then on an ice-axe wedged in the crack, he made a famous lead to the top of the Grépon. Mummery made an attempt to climb the last pitch unaided but had to be pulled up the last part by the other two. On the summit, three rock seats awaited them – there, champagne and the planting of the ice-axe.

Mummery entrusted Burgener with the task of fixing in place the ice-axe that would become the object of a challenge met by the Frenchman, Henri Dunod, four years later. Mummery wrote:

The summit is of palatial dimensions and is provided with three stone chairs.

The loftiest of these was at once appropriated by Burgener for the ice-axe, and the inferior members of the party were bidden to bring stones to build it securely in position. This solemn rite being duly performed, we stretched ourselves at full length and mocked M. Couette's popgun at Chamonix with a pop of far more exhilarating sort.

On returning to Chamonix, Mummery described the rock difficulties that they had faced and overcome. He confirmed that the ice-axe would have plenty of time to get rusty before it received another visit to the South summit and that he was ready to offer the sum of 100 francs to the person who brought it back: 100 gold francs of the Third Republic of Jules Grévy. To provide a point of reference, one knows that in 1885, for the sum of 200 francs, the guide François Simond and three other Chamonix men led Henri Brulle to the summit of the Dru.

François-Henri Dunod was born in 1865 and was thus 16 years old when the Mummery, Burgener, Venetz team made the first ascent of the Grépon. Four years later in 1885, after a swift initiation on the Dent du Géant, the Matterhorn and the Dru, he teamed up with the Chamoniards, the brothers François and Gaspard Simond and Auguste Tairraz to attack the Grépon. Between 6 August and 2 September, they make six attempts. To replace the ice-axe of the Mummery team, they carried up successively a two metre long pine tree, then a French flag which, for want of a better place they had left on the Grands Charmoz, then a beam three metres long which they left up there with a view to a fourth try. On the sixth attempt, on 2 September 1885, they carried up three metal ladders with a total length of 11 metres, even at that insufficient for Auguste Tairraz. François Simond, however, employed the technique of throwing a weighted rope and gained the summit.

The Yearbook of the French Alpine Club for 1885 records:

Henri Dunod gives an interesting account of the month he spent besieging the Aiguille des Charmoz (which he names incorrectly the Aiguille du Grépon) having continuous sight of the ice-axe of Mr Mummery, until the final attempt of 2 September 1885.

In 1892 and 1893, Mummery repeated his ascent of the Charmoz and of the Grépon, this time guideless, but accompanied by a photographer with a camera having 13x18 plates, which was used to photograph him at work

in the crack that bears his name, a celebrated shot that has been endlessly reproduced. On the South summit, he discovered that the axe which had been well anchored by Burgener was there no longer. Henri Dunod had taken it down to Chamonix.

Next, the guide François Simond sought to exchange the ice-axe for the reward promised in 1881. Mummery refused. For what reason? According to some, because he felt that too much time had passed; according to others, because Dunod and his team, the brothers Simond and Auguste Tairraz, had not truly followed the route of the first ascent and above all had used metal ladders – means ‘unfair’.

Fifty years later, that is to say in the 1940s, François Dunod, the son of François-Henri the alpiniste – he had died in 1946 – replied to a messenger from the Alpine Club, who wanted to exhibit the Grépon ice-axe in London: ‘Too late, Mummery did not meet his commitments – the ice-axe will stay in France.’

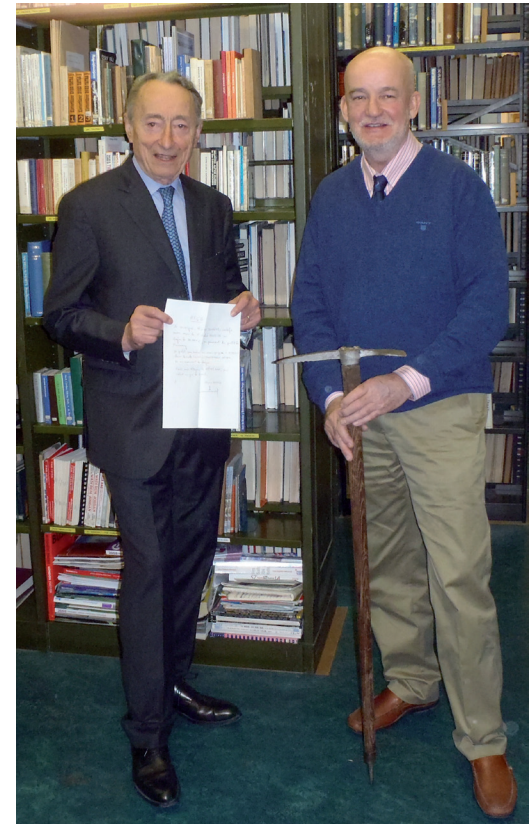
Olivier Dunod, a man of about 50 years of age and a frequent visitor to the Oisans, both on foot and on ski, had always seen the ice-axe in the house of his great-grandfather in Les Étages, until the moment when his father, by this time more than 80 years old, had lent it to the museum in Saint-Christophe-en-Oisans. Later, realising that this small local museum, packed with alpine history, was going to change its management and thus perhaps its point of view, Dunod had judged it wise to end the loan and had recently requested the return of the ice-axe. He now wished to dispose of the axe, not by means of a donation, but to cede it to the Alpine Club for an amount at least equal to the value of the gold francs of the original Grépon challenge. A ‘compensation’, he tells us, finally to fulfil the promise made all those years ago by Mummery.

The Axe (*Michel Bataillon, translated and edited by Jerry Lovatt*)

Although ice-axes of the period were notable for their size, this one is a giant among giants. Of total length 112 cm, it weighs no less than 1.45 kilos. Under the pick are engraved the initials ‘BV’ followed by a small cross. Although it is possible that they could stand for Burgener Venetz, it seems unlikely that they would have represented both their names on the same axe. Ice-axes normally belong to one person, not two, and it is therefore almost certainly the case that they are the initials of Benedikt Venetz. Under the adze there is an italic ‘M’ and although tempting to associate this with Mummery, it is perhaps more likely to be the mark of the maker.

However, Ruedi Bhend, whose company has supplied some of the greatest names in mountaineering history and who ranks as one of the leading authorities on early ice-axes, has failed to identify this mark. Likewise, Konstanz Willisch, who has been responsible for the restoration of numerous historic ice-axes, was unable to associate the mark with any known early maker in the German speaking part of Switzerland. Added to the fact that the Chamoniards were some years ahead of the Swiss in ice-axe manufacture, this leads to the hypothesis that the Mummery team was supplied locally

204. Paul Braithwaite, the then AC President, with Mummery’s ice-axe and its generous donor, André Moulin, at the Alpine Club Library, 9 November 2010. (*Tadeusz Hudowski*)



in the Chamonix area. Jackie Masino, who has worked all his life in the Charlet factory, indicates that the founder Josef Charlet forged his first axe in 1880. Having said that, when shown photos of the axe, Masino concluded that

it was most likely the product of an artisanale forge which had used the mark they normally applied to agricultural tools.

Investigations at the Heimat Museum in Grindelwald and at the Musée Alpin in Chamonix have also failed to reveal any other axe with the italic M mark. Research continues, but it seems likely that this axe originally belonged to Benedikt Venetz and was made by an artisan toolmaker in the Valais.

The Acquisition (*André Moulin*)

I first heard of this in a call from Jerry Lovatt, Keeper of the Artefacts at the AC. Following a communication to the Alpine Club from Olivier Dunod, concerning the ice-axe, Jerry asked me if I would be able to contact M Dunod to establish exactly what he had in mind, as this was not entirely clear. In the event, I decided to visit him at his house in La Béarde. It seemed a good idea to take someone with me, not least to act as a witness to the proceedings. To fulfil this role, I chose my friend and neighbour, Michel Bataillon, a mountaineer with a major interest in the history of the sport.

On arrival, we checked the axe, which proved to be very large and heavy, with the letters 'B V' under the pick, as mentioned above by Michel. It appeared to us most likely to be the axe left by Mummery.

Olivier Dunod explained that the axe had been kept in the Dunod family and had been handed down from father to son. Following its retrieval from the museum in Saint Christophe, he had no particular reason to part with the axe, unless he was made 'an interesting proposal'. He was thus waiting to hear what we had to say.

In response, I made him a dual proposal. First, he would be appointed a life member of the Alpine Club, without any subscription fee, and that the transfer of the axe would be covered in articles with photos in the next *Alpine Journal*. Second, we would pay him the discounted present value of the money his ancestor did not receive and round it up. He immediately turned down the first proposal, as of no interest to him. After a look at official statistics of conversions of francs in euros that I had brought with me, even rounded up, he rejected the second proposal. Dunod said that his bottom price was 10,000 euros. I advised him that this was way beyond what we could envisage and that I would revert to the Alpine Club.

Michel and I agreed that the price was very high: 10,000 euros is a large amount of money, from any point of view. I tried to contact Jerry on the phone to ask him the sort of money the Club could afford to pay but I failed to get hold of him. My friend, who had observed the conversation between Dunod and me, told me that Dunod was only interested in money, that the negotiation was closed in advance and that Dunod would not lower his price. I regarded this axe as an extremely rare relic of the great period of British Alpinism and that it had to be at the Alpine Club. This opportunity to acquire it being the first in 125 years, I felt that I should not miss it for a matter of money. It also occurred to me that the Alpine Club was probably short of cash and that I should provide the necessary financial assistance, bear the cost of the axe and donate it to the club.

The same afternoon, we went back to Dunod, worrying that he might change his mind. I gave him a 10,000 euros cheque from one of my personal accounts. He delivered me a receipt 'du cheque de 10,000 euros en paiement du piolet de Mummery'. However, he said he was not prepared to hand over the axe to me until his bank account had been credited. I thus requested he hand it over personally to me in Serre Chevalier.

On each of the following mornings, I had a look at my bank account on my computer. When my account was debited, I phoned Dunod. He answered he was not available for the next few days. I did not care for that very much, so we went immediately to La Béarde and I took possession of the axe.

Not long after, on 9 November, I visited the Alpine Club and had the pleasure of presenting the axe to the president, the keeper of the artefacts and the committee. After its four years on the summit of the Grépon, and 125 years in a chalet in the Oisans, this important artefact has now finally found its true home in the clubhouse of the AC in London.

ALPINE CLUB LIBRARY ANNUAL REPORT 2009 – 2010

Hywel Lloyd, chairman of the Council of Trustees of the Alpine Club Library writes: One of the key achievements has been the improved library operation which all visitors compliment. The organisation and work by Jerry Lovatt, our hon librarian, and our new librarian, Tadeusz Hudowski, exudes capability and shine; gone are some of the old dreary approaches. New computing equipment has appeared in the library reading area to give better, digital access to several collections (and this access will continue to increase in scope); special thanks are due to John Town for this installation.

Finances have been difficult but we believe we are through the worst due to careful money management. Thus our hon treasurer, Richard Coatsworth, has been able to decide to retire, after 10 years in post. Special thanks to Richard for such splendid work. So we are seeking a new treasurer – is there a volunteer out there? John Mellor has looked after our investments and the change to new fund managers; John has also now decided to retire. So, thanks to John for many years service, and a welcome to Kimball Morrison in this role.

On a sadder note, I record that Mike Hewson died after a short but sharp fight against cancer in the summer of 2010. Many readers will know Mike because he ran the operation to sell books that had been donated to the library but which were triplicates or quadruplicates of books already held; this service helps members find the book they want and gains a steady and important income for the library. Mike was also the company secretary of the Library Charity and looked after the essential paperwork. He is very much missed by us all. Barbara Grigor-Taylor and Jerry have taken over the task of cataloguing books for sale, taking orders and posting out books sold.

The work of the hon archivist, Glyn Hughes, continues unabated and we have received several important donations of diaries and papers. The Himalayan Index also gains entries through the careful compilations by Sally Russell.

The photo library is still the Herculean task facing us. Anna Lawford's work has piloted a comprehensive cataloguing system. A book is easier to catalogue because it has a title and, usually, an author. A photograph might be by an unknown photographer and of persons unknown; although we can probably recognise any mountain. So, cataloguing is taking a tremendous amount of time. However, with trained volunteers from NADFAS (National Association of Decorative and Fine Art Societies), previously Philip Pepper and now Harry Melville, Anna has supervised a large amount of conservation work on the historic glass slides and albums of prints in the photo collections. Anna will be retiring from the keeper of the photographs role in March 2011; meanwhile, Sue Hare continues to run the operation of sales of photo reproductions; another steady and important income for the library.