

by Diadem. (A literary-academic friend and AC member assures me that this is perfectly alright and is called 'intertextuality'.) They are *Täschhorn*, *Allalinhorn*, *Barre des Ecrins* and the *Dom*.

I wasn't any the less engaged with painting these than the others and consider them just as successful as paintings. My main concern was to make them self-sufficient as images in themselves, zooming in on only the aspects that interested me for visual and dramatic reasons, (always including the summits of course) and that would fit into the self-imposed format I'd settled on, and which would work both as a celebration of a particular peak and its history and as a serious painting in its own right. I couldn't limit myself to only depicting the route of the first ascent either, many of those not having enough visual interest in themselves.

Although I've often cropped summits off in paintings in order to free them of some of their symbolic baggage, summits are interesting in themselves as almost conceptual spaces where success or failure on a mountain is defined, and sometimes conversely as sacred spaces which can be either respected or defiled by entering them or not.

My interest usually rests in the main body of the mountain, its internal spaces where things are shifting and provisional and part of a process that's happening fast or slowly. From a distance my own gaze is as much drawn towards the field of forces within and across them as in their defining edges.

I counted 37 English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish first ascents of Alpine 4000ers from this 'Golden Age' – 18 of which I chose as possible subjects. My choice of which to paint was primarily whether they fired me up enough and had the potential to be more than an just an illustration or mountain portrait and whether they would work within the restriction of the size and proportions of the 16 x 24 ins. rectangle I'd chosen for them all. There were many more that equally interested me and that I could have painted.

I hope that the series forms a whole unit, a kind of fugue with counterpoint of variations on the same theme – 10 visual routes from the bottom of the canvas to the top, mountain base to summit, comprised of thick and thin paint, being translations of snow, ice, rock and sky, with sunlight and shadow defining the form, and the formal abstract visual interest spread over the surface of the canvas. The summits nearly touch the tops of the canvas so as to maximise the visual extent of the mountain and to align it with the picture surface.

I included one peak from outside the period – *Aiguille Blanche du Peuterey*, climbed in 1885. I couldn't resist its dramatic steepness and hanging glacier, which, along with *Mt Blanc de Tacul* – (I also wanted to include a rock face) – were sourced from photographs I'd taken whilst climbing the Dent du Géant in the summer of 1983.

It has been an absorbing journey, revisiting the Alps through paint. While working on the *Weisshorn* I couldn't but wonder what John Tyndall, who first climbed the mountain in 1861, and was also the physicist who 150 years ago discovered that carbon dioxide traps heat, would think of the situation we are in now, and what these Alps will look like in another 150 years' time.

150 Years of Climbing on Monte Disgrazia



Monte Disgrazia from Monte Sissone. On the left is the Val Malenco approach, on the right the Val di Mello side climbed by the Kennedy-Stephen party. (Giordano Giumella)

The 150th Anniversary Celebrations by Sash Tusa

Monte Disgrazia (3678m), the highest mountain in the Val Masino range of north-east Italy, has, perhaps, become slightly overlooked in recent decades by UK climbers, but it remains a complex and challenging mountain that is very closely associated with the Alpine Club. This is both through its history (the first ascent was by a team that included ES Kennedy and Leslie Stephen) and, more recently, the dedication and extensive work of AC member Giuseppe 'Popi' Miotti.

A native of nearby Sondrio, Popi has worked tirelessly to publicise the mountain and maintain awareness of its history, current climbing opportunities, and significance within the broader story of 19th century alpinism. It was Popi who extended the formal offer to Club members to come and commemorate the 150th Anniversary of the first ascent, with a climb planned for 24 August 2012. The Club was represented by Paul Braithwaite (past president), Henry Day (past vice president) and Sash Tusa (associate member).



Disgrazia billboard, Chiareggio.

We arrived in the area on 22 August and rapidly became aware of two features of the celebrations. Firstly their sheer scale: a profusion of hoardings and banners in both Valmalenco and Valmasino, the two main valley bases for climbing Disgrazia, speeches, a grand dinner and, most impressive, an open-air dramatisation (in blank verse) of the First Ascent by actor and poet Emanuele Franz. But also, underlying all this, an understanding and deep appreciation for the role of the Alpine Club in the ascent.

Maybe it was the presence of Englishmen, that the open-air launch of the whole commemorations at Chiareggio should trigger a torrential downpour. Yet this potential setback showed Popi at his most efficient. Within minutes, it seemed, the local church was opened, and more than 200 dripping wet people crowded in to hear Popi, and then a speech from Paul Braithwaite on behalf of the Alpine Club. Such was the quality of Popi's planning that a translator had even been laid on for Paul.

We became aware of the more recent history of Disgrazia at dinner. Invitees included many of the area's most esteemed guides, perhaps the most impressive of whom was 93-year old Fausto Rovelli. A retired doctor, Fausto, with Carlo Negri, had made the second ascent of Disgrazia's north face in 1941, adding a new direct line. But the last word of another of the ancient guides was even more moving and thought provoking for us. He came up to Paul and Henry in the street after dinner: 'You are the Alpine Club?' he asked, eagerly. 'You epitomise all that is best about style and tradition in mountaineering.'

Next day we made our way up towards the Refugio Ponti, our base for the climb, following the original route taken by Kennedy and Stephen, along with the renowned Swiss guide Melchior Anderegg and Kennedy's servant, Thomas Cox. National and historical stereotypes all too rapidly were adopted, with myself cast as Cox, and carrying the heavy kit, while Paul and Henry (more naturally gravitating towards a Leslie Stephen-type aesthete and socialite?) strolled ahead. Italian climbers coming down from the hut recognised the set-up immediately. They passed Paul, a distinguished figure clad in modern outdoor gear, then on seeing Henry,

bedecked with a Tilley hat and a rather dashing silk scarf, their eyes lit up: 'Are you the Alpine Club?' they asked, almost without exception. The record is strangely blank on whether the answer was, 'Yes, I am' or 'Yes, One is'.

The Ponti hut is set amidst a moraine field that stretches up towards the Preda Rossa glacier, and thence to Disgrazia's north-west ridge which was followed by Kennedy and company. Rated PD+, it remains the normal route and offers a fair degree of exposure for the grade. The hospitality in the hut was generous, and the company at dinner good. Perhaps, in retrospect, we should have taken more heed of the warden's cheerful forecast for the next day: 'It will be fine weather, except for storms.'

So we rose at 4.30 next morning and waited briefly for a party that had left the valley at midnight and which would accompany us to the summit. Despite having walked through the night, when they arrived it became apparent that their leader, a colonel of the Alpini (Italy's elite mountain troops) had yet to break sweat or even breathe deeply.

We climbed up to, and then along, a kilometre-long moraine ridge towards the glacier, the guttural croaking of ptarmigan to either side of us, though the birds were well out of sight of our head torches. However, three hours later, as we approached the glacier in daylight, we could see clouds rolling over the ridge in a strong wind. The Alpini colonel cheerfully volunteered to run up the glacier; he returned, almost within minutes it seemed, with the news that conditions were unfavourable. And so we retreated back to the Ponti and thence towards the valley. The chorus of greetings changed slightly as we walked back down to the car park. Now it was, 'Inglese? Your Land Rover has a flat tyre!'

Paul, Henry and I owe great thanks to our hosts, in particular to Popi, for his superb organisation of the entire 150th celebrations, to Stephano and Amadea Scetti, wardens of the Ponti hut, and Fabrizio Giussani of the CAI huts board for his hospitality up at the refugio.

Disgrazia offers a good range of routes across the grades, and several different huts, approaches and valley bases. In the Valmalenco valley, in particular, there is abundant and well-organised bouldering and sport climbing. We will be back.



150th celebration dinner in Chiareggio: Paul Braithwaite and Giuseppe 'Popi' Miotti central and in front (smiling) Miro Fiordi, CEO of the Credito Valtellinese Bank, one of the main sponsors of the event. (Archives of Monte Disgrazia 150th celebrations)



North wall of Torre dei Corni Bruciati showing the route *Il futuro siamo noi* (*We are the future*). (Giuseppe Miotti)

Two Routes One August by Giuseppe 'Popi' Miotti

'Be kind to your knees. You'll miss THEM when they've gone...' Like a mantra, the words from the Big Kahuna's final monologue echo obsessively in my head, accompanying our descent of the precipitous scree of the Corni Bruciati. We've just established a new route, feeling our way in the mist. Instinctively my gaze surveys the surrounding rock faces seeking other lines worth investigating. There's no lack of them, but many are now too difficult for me. The curtain of mist parts and our new route reappears behind us. Chuckling we christen it *We're the Future*. Perhaps Moghi and Gianluca are also beginning to feel their age. I've ticked another box on my 'To Do' list and as far as I'm concerned the season's over. But Gianluca's got other plans: the first ascent of the south spur of the eastern summit of Monte Disgrazia. For some reason my knees start to ache even more. But the idea is tempting and the promising weather conditions don't concede alibis. For the whole descent I've been acknowledging Gianluca's enthusiasm for the new route with non-committal nods, pretending not to have heard. Moghi on the other hand is warming to the idea: he's never climbed the Disgrazia and this might be the ideal opportunity. I'm trapped...

A couple of days and half a dozen aspirin later, here I am with my two friends and Michele Comi at the Piasci. Taking the path for the Passo Cassandra, we leave the Bosio hut behind us and having edged round a

Gianluca Maspes mid-way on the Torre dei Corni Bruciati climb, just below the crux (VII-). (Giuseppe Miotti)

waterfall we enter a small grassy depression. The light is fading but we still have some height to gain in order to get as near to our spur as possible. Threading our way between great boulders of serpentine rock, we traverse above the shore of the first Cassandra lakelet, now little more than a dried-out water meadow. To the north, the plateau is walled in by a buttress above which we hope to find a terrace; we'll bivouac there in the rocky heart of the Disgrazia massif. This is one of the most solitary spots in these mountains and here I finally encounter the Torrione Misterioso.

It was way back in something like 1938 that my Uncle 'Pepo' took a picture of a handsome serpentine pinnacle that I had been seeking in vain up and down the Val Malenco ever since. But somehow I'd neglected the remote Cassandra area. Now, more than 70 years later, as I look skywards from our bivouac, there it is, as elegant and solid as the old photograph suggested: the elusive pinnacle. Closer to hand a dark triangular buttress of amphibolite holds out the prospect of a tricky climb. I call it the Punta Nera.

It's almost 4 o'clock next morning and I'm ascending the slope that leads to the moraine terrace once occupied by the eastern tip of the Cassandra glacier. My headlamp illuminates a jumble of rocks that my mineralogical instincts tell me might conceal a geological treasure-trove. The slope becomes unstable, a sure sign that the ice was a recent guest here, and just

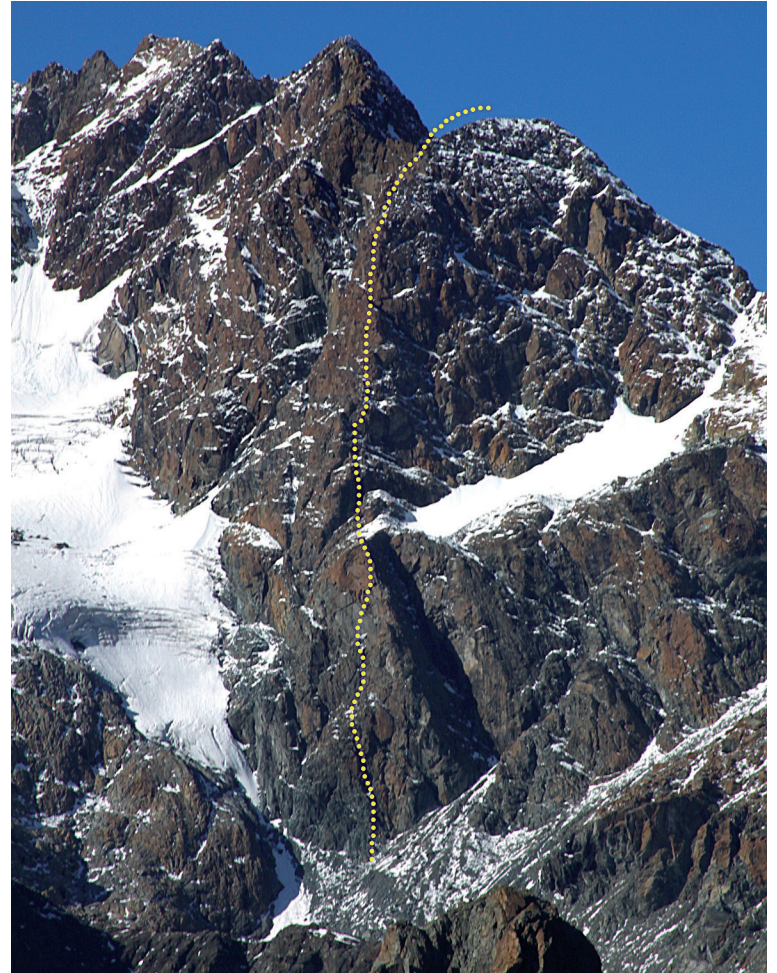




Gianluca Maspes on the last pitch (VI+) of *Il futuro siamo noi*. (Giuseppe Miotti)

as I'm about to switch off my lamp its rays ignite a twinkle. Bending down gingerly I discover a miraculous clutch of red garnets. This is perhaps my first real success as a mineralogist for more than 30 years. I deposit the garnets at the start of our route by way of a propitiatory offering.

With the exception of a brief overhang on loose boulders, a tricky pitch brilliantly negotiated by Michele, the climb is on wonderful asperous rock interrupted by occasional detritic ledges. It's a beautiful route – the sort



The south spur of the east summit of Monte Disgrazia showing the new route *Via del 149°* (*Way of The 149th*). (Giuseppe Miotti)

mountain guidebooks might describe as 'profoundly satisfying'. After almost 700 metres of exhilarating climbing we're on the summit. The weather is glorious, the view spectacular. 'So, what shall we call it?' asks Moghi. After some consideration Gianluca blurts: 'Next year's the 150th anniversary of the first ascent of the Disgrazia, so why not call it the *Way of The 149th*?'. I grin at the unashamed marketing cynicism of Gianluca's proposal: having committed ourselves to organising the sesquicentennial celebrations, why not begrudge the event a little additional publicity?

I snap a few photographs before commencing the interminable descent of the eastern crest, a combination of rock and scree with the occasional patch of snow. Shortly before the Passo Cassandra a large slab with a



Michele Comi nearing the Torre Rossa (Red Tower), last difficult pitch (VI+) on the *Via del 149°*. (Giuseppe Miotti)

Grade IV pitch midway through keeps me busy; I'm not roped up and with approach shoes on my feet and the burden of the rucksack on my back it's no laughing matter. When we finally reach the pass I make a conscious decision to descend cautiously, but after a few steps I realise it's going to be torture. Everything's precarious and with my knees now really protesting I'm unable to move with the speed and fluidity that are so essential on terrain like this. Instead I resign myself to do penance and the pain ends only when we reach the bivouac once more.

In the pretty dale secreted between the Punta Nera and the Torrione Misterioso I wander off to where a tiny rill meanders between the screes and isolated clumps of cotton grass. Gently I immerse my feet and aching knees in the icy water and, drunk with exhaustion, let my thoughts wander. Meditating on my situation, the more I ponder the more I realise, incredulously, that rather than exalting in the climb and reliving the euphoria of its key moments, instead of imagining new routes and fresh sensations, at this moment all I can think of is that yet another turn of the spiral has come full circle.



Michele Comi topping the last difficulty of the *Via del 149°*. In the background right is the Corni Bruciati. (Giuseppe Miotti)

Summary: *Il futuro siamo noi (We're the future)*, Torre di Corni Bruciati (c2750m) north face, 300m, VII-, Gianluca Maspes, Giuseppe Miotti, Stefano Mogavero, 18 August 2011; *Via del 149° (Way of The 149th)*, Monte Disgrazia east summit (3483m) south-east spur, 680m, VII-, Michele Comi, Gianluca Maspes, Giuseppe Miotti, Stefano Mogavero, 21 August 2011.

The Significance of a Mountain by Kim Sommerschild & Luisa Bonesio

Let's be frank: Leslie Stephen couldn't care less about the social, cultural, historical, expressive or even historical significance of Monte Disgrazia – or indeed of any of the peaks he climbed. For him mountaineering was a sport like cricket, a symbolic challenge not to be undertaken lightly. The equation is simple: 'winning' equals 'summitting' and conversely 'withdrawing' is tantamount to 'losing'.

On the other hand, how could it be otherwise? Stephen was a profoundly Enlightened utilitarian, for whom the imposition of intellect over imagination was a moral imperative. In the words of his compatriot John Milton, adapted by Charles Jennens for Handel:

*As steals the morn upon the night / And melts the shades away, /
So truth does Fancy's Charm dissolve, / and rising Reason puts to flight /
The Fumes that did the Mind involve, / Restoring intellectual Day.*

The 'rationalisation' of Monte Disgrazia in 1862 heralds the 'morn' of tourism in the Valtellina region. As the gentlemen of the Grand Tour were replaced by the urban masses, so local values and traditions were mutated to reflect the requirements of this new breed of visitor, and in doing so, the masses simultaneously corrupted the very thing they sought, turning the unique alpine environment into an extension of suburbia. Mountaineering itself underwent a similar transformation under the pressure of performance-prioritising athletes. The mountain environment has now become an industrial resource like any other, to be exploited in the context of a global capitalist rationale.

In this context, sobriety and respect are alien to the culture of consumerism and entertainment. The main victims of this hegemony of greed have been the intrinsic essence, purity and ethics of our unique alpine environments and their inhabitants. In the process of colonising them we have mislaid the grammar for the comprehension of a timeless territorial vernacular, a subtle geographical language whose vocabulary evolved along ancient trackways and walls, by trees and boundary stones, through common law and common lore: a cosmic gentleman's agreement with nature which evolved when night stars still gleamed bright enough to give the dizzy sensation of riding a giant galactic Catherine wheel. Our perception of ancestral darkness has been blunted by the insistent urban glare in which we live: though we may see the signs, we are no longer able to interpret them.

Country folk perceive their surroundings with their entire selves. Such people are memory incarnate, not merely of single events, but of a coherent continuum of familiar circumstances which have penetrated to the core of their being, modifying it in the process. To inhabit that serene dimension of existence cannot be taught – perhaps not even consciously perceived.

But such serenity proved too fragile to resist the 20th century: it took



Kim Sommerschild, *Monte Disgrazia west-northwest crest*, watercolour, 300x400mm, 2010

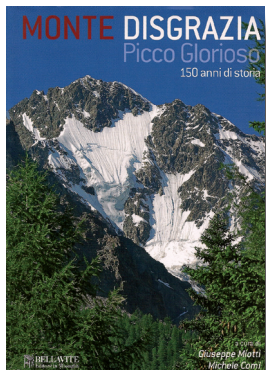
little more than 50 years to wipe out a way of life that had prevailed for 50 generations. Values evolved over a millenium that seemed destined to last for eternity proved no match for the tawdry consumer benefits that followed in the wake of post-war materialism.

So above all a reason to commemorate the first ascent of Monte Disgrazia is to become conscious of the cost inflicted by the 'benefits' it brought. Only



Kim Sommerschild, *Monte Disgrazia north face*, watercolour, 600x440mm, 2012

then can we aspire to rethinking our priorities and implement long-term policies that might once more restore the intrinsic dignity of the mountains, their traditions and arcane values, and of the people who inhabit these high places.



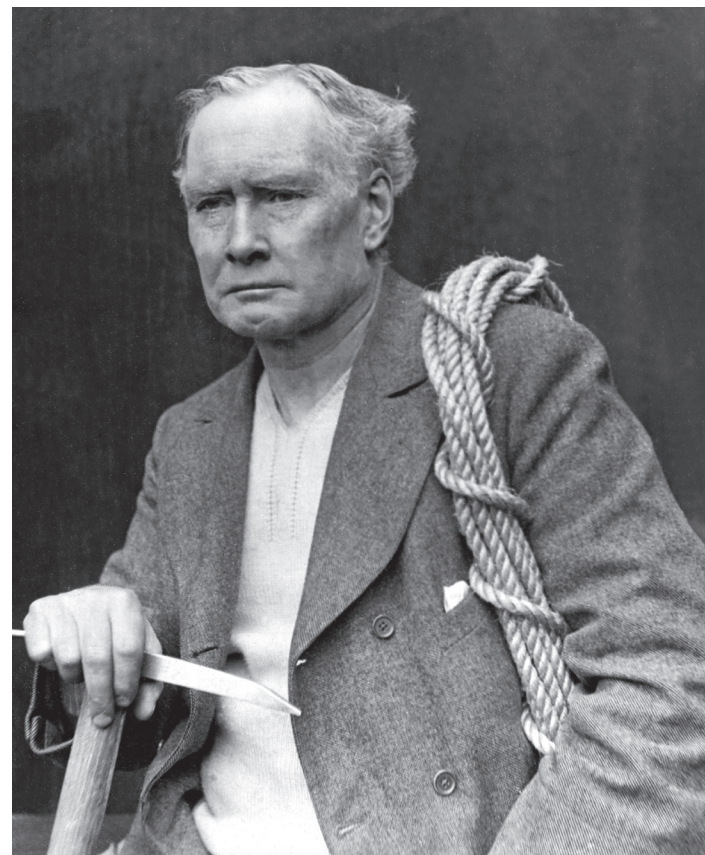
Monte Disgrazia: Picco Glorioso, 150 anni di storia
Compiled by Giuseppe Miotti and Michele Comi
Bellavite, 2012, pp216, €28

'It was one of the finest peaks that we had ever seen, and... few had looked more difficult.' That's Edward Kennedy writing in the volume I of the *Alpine Journal* on his and Leslie Stephen's first encounter with Monte Disgrazia. To mark the 150 years of mountaineering on Disgrazia, Giuseppe Miotti and Michele Comi have produced this affectionate book, telling the mountain's story from the serpentine rock of its summit and the birds and beasts that inhabit its

slopes to the generations of climbers who have played their games thereon. Thankfully the multi-talented Kim Sommerschild, whose watercolour adorns the front cover of this journal and who co-authored the preceding thoughtful article, has provided an English language abstract to the Italian text, and all the captions to the many beautiful illustrations are in both Italian and English. **SG**

GUS MORTON

A Conversation With Whymper



'I felt the presence of a man standing over me. He was in his fifties, with receding hair and a stern, unfriendly expression...'
Edward Whymper 1840-1911 (*Alpine Club Photo Library*)

Edward Whymper, the best known of the alpinists of the 'Golden Era' (1854 to 1865), died alone in a hotel in Chamonix on 16 September 1911. His name will always be associated with the Hörnli Ridge on the Matterhorn. I decided a fitting tribute to him would be to climb this route on the 100th anniversary of his death.

Nowadays, the Hörnli has a reputation for being overcrowded. It has become a huge commercial success for the local guides, who charge £1,400