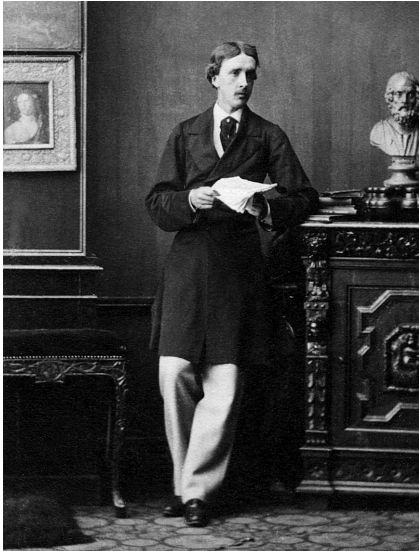


MICHAEL YELLOWLEES

‘Coolest of The Cool’

A portrait of Reginald Macdonald XI of Kingsburgh



Reginald John Somerled Macdonald XI of Kingsburgh (1840-76). (*The Library of Nineteenth-Century Photography*)

‘The coolest of the cool’ was how Edward Whymper described his climbing partner, Reginald Macdonald. Other contemporary accounts corroborate Whymper’s opinion of Macdonald, whose exploits included a significant number of first ascents and passages. The Reverend Hereford Brooke George in his account of their crossing of the Col du Tour Noir above Argentière in 1863 noted that his ‘attachment to rocks is notorious and constant’, while his climbing style was described by his brother-in-law, William Hall, as ‘somewhat monkey’. While many of Macdonald’s climbs are recorded in the *Alpine Journal*, Walt Unsworth in his *Encyclopedia of Mountaineering* suggests that his exploits have not received the recognition they deserve.

Reginald John Somerled Macdonald was born on 1 October 1840 in Jhansi in northern India. He was the son of Captain Allan Macdonald of the 4th Bengal Native Infantry and Anne Smith, the daughter of his commanding officer, Major-General John Smith. Allan was described in

the *Kingsburgh Family Book*, published privately in 1961, as one of those ‘who in the early decades of that [nineteenth] century so materially helped to build up and consolidate the Indian Empire’. Reginald’s great grandmother was Flora Macdonald, Charles Edward Stuart’s saviour in the aftermath of the 1745 rebellion. Macdonald had no recollection of his father who died of an unknown illness in Lucknow in 1842. The following year his uncle, Major James Somerled Macdonald X of Kingsburgh, died childless and the title passed to his young nephew. By this time it carried no lands or wealth and was simply the territorial designation of the tack or long lease formerly held by the family at Snizort on the Isle of Skye.

The *Kingsburgh Family Book* records, that like his father, Macdonald was educated at Elgin Academy and subsequently at Eton. He was not one of the school’s most gifted pupils, and his school days and career in the civil service are aptly summed up in a poem describing former alumni:

*There are some who did nothing at school, much since;
And others much then, since naught...
There were several duffers and several bores
Whose faces I’ve half forgot,
Whom I lived among, when the world was young,
And who talked ‘no end of rot’;
Are they now little clerks who stroll in the parks
Or scribble with grimy fist?
Or rich little peers who live on Scotch moors?
Well, they’re all in the Old School List*

With little family wealth to support him Macdonald was forced to seek gainful employment, and with few connections and no qualifications his options were limited. He chose not to follow a career in the military and instead entered the civil service. In 1859 he was appointed as a clerk in the Colonial Office and in time rose through the ranks to become privy secretary to various Colonial Secretaries.

Why or when Macdonald first began climbing is not clear, but it is likely that he was first introduced to it by a colleague in the civil service. One of his first climbing companions was Henry Norris, a fellow clerk in the Colonial Office, with whom he climbed the Weisstor, Monte Rosa (3642m) in August 1860 along with Norris’s cousin, the Reverend Charles Style. This solitary ascent appears to have been sufficient to qualify him for membership of the Alpine Club in February 1861. In July of that year he and Whymper completed the first British ascent of the highest summit of Mont Pelvoux (3946m) in the Dauphiné. In his *Scrambles Amongst the Alps* Whymper recorded that the climb gave him as much satisfaction as subsequent more difficult ones, describing it as a ‘very delightful scramble’. He also referred to ‘our companion on Mont Pelvoux [Macdonald] to whom so much of our success had been due’.

Macdonald’s climbing career began in earnest in the summer of 1862 and

for the next three years he spent three or four weeks each summer climbing in the Alps. In mid-June 1862, along with Charles Mathews and Francis Tuckett, he spent a frustrating week in Chamonix where the weather was 'thoroughly and unremittingly bad'. Macdonald and Mathews then crossed to Courmayeur via the Cols des Fours and de la Seigne. On 25 June they crossed the Col du Géant and two days later ascended Mont Blanc by the Aiguille du Goûter and the Bosses. Macdonald then crossed to Zermatt by the Col d'Hérens where he met up with Whymper with whom he made two attempts on the Matterhorn from Breuil (modern day Cervinia). On the first ascent they reached the arête below the Chimney before being driven back by bad weather. Two days later they reached the Great Tower, but were again forced to retreat this time due to illness to one of the party. Whymper records that Jean-Antoine Carel, one of the guides, refused to go on, but 'Macdonald, ever the coolest of the cool, suggested we could do without them, but our better judgment prevailed'. With his vacation at an end Macdonald returned to London.

In the summer of 1863 Macdonald returned to Chamonix and on 20 July with Frederick Morshead, Adolphus Moore, the Reverend George, Russell Stephenson, and their guides Peter Perren, Melchior Anderegg and Christian Almer made the third recorded passage of the Col de Miage, between Les Contamines and Courmayeur. They attempted to find an alternative route up Mont Blanc from the Brenva glacier, but the route was dismissed by Anderegg and Perren as too steep and dangerous. Two days later Macdonald and George with Almer and Anderegg made the first passage of the Col du Tour Noir between the Aiguille d'Argentière and the Tour Noir, a feat not repeated until 1890. George's account of the expedition is considered one of the finest climbing accounts of the period. He recorded how the party travelled by carriage from Chamonix to Martigny. This particularly pleased Almer and Anderegg as it asserted 'the dignity of Englishmen and Oberlanders before the eyes of the assembled natives'. The party crossed from Argentière to Osières by the ridge between the Aiguille d'Argentière and the Tour Noir and then descended to Osières by the Saleina glacier. As George reported 'we had made, entirely by mistake, a new pass which no-one had even known to exist'. To prove to any doubters that a pass existed George applied the unanswerable syllogism: 'Between every two adjacent peaks there is a pass. The Tour Noir and Aiguille d'Argentière are adjacent peaks therefore there is a pass between them'. They followed this on 29 July with a second ascent of the Mönch (4107m) via a new route up the south-east ridge.

On 4 August Macdonald, Edward Buxton, Hall, Florence Crauford Grove, another of Macdonald's brothers-in-law, and their guides Melchior Anderegg and Peter Perren, made a first passage of the Unter Studerjoch, crossing from Grimsel to Viesch between the Finsteraarhorn and the Oberaarhorn. A few days later Macdonald and Buxton with the same guides climbed the Weisshorn (4506m), the massive three-sided pyramid above Zermatt, where 'much difficulty was experienced in consequence of the

state and abundance of the snow in the couloirs'. They then turned their attention to the Dent d'Hérens (4171m), which it was universally agreed 'challenges comparison in mass and grandeur with its great neighbour [the Matterhorn]'. Their attempt almost failed before it had started when Grove got separated from the party leading to unfounded fears that he had been murdered by a local chalet owner – a 'Sheikh of the Alps, black bearded, patriarchal in appearance'. On 12 August, with Grove back in the fold, the party crossed the Grandes Murailles glacier and ascended the south-west face of the mountain. At 12.30pm Macdonald and Montagu Woodmass summited, thanks in no small part to Anderegg who spent a large part of the day hewing steps 'the shape and size of Glastonbury chairs'. They were joined shortly after by Hall and on surveying the view from the summit all were in agreement that it was superior to that from any other mountain they had climbed. Their success was made all the sweeter by the fact that six days earlier Whymper had failed in his attempt: 'This was the only mountain in the Alps which I have essayed to ascend, that has not sooner or later fallen to me. Our failure was mortifying.' Moore also admitted he 'felt horribly envious of Macdonald and his successful attempt on this fortress'. This first ascent was quickly followed by another, Macdonald, Hall, Woodmass and Grove, with Anderegg and Perren, ascending the Parrotspitze (4432m) by the Lysjoch. Macdonald's season was rounded off with an ascent of the Galenstock (3583m) and crossings of the Oberaarjoch, one of the oldest glacier passes in the Alps, and the Strahlegg.

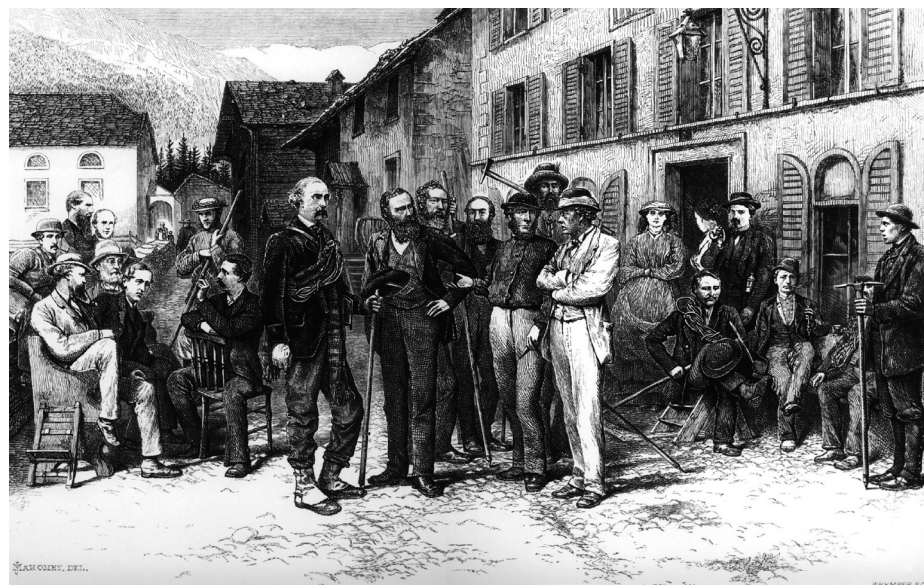
The following year Macdonald returned to the Alps and at the end of July 1864 with Stephen and Grove crossed the Klausen Pass to the east of Altdorf. They failed in their attempt on the Claridenstock but did complete a first passage of the Scheerjoch (now known as the Kammlilucke) between Maderanertal and Unterschächen. After an unsuccessful attempt to cross the Winterberg Ridge, they made the first passage of the Wetterlücke between Tschingelhorn and the Lauterbrunnen Breithorn. On 7 August they attended a wrestling match between the men of the Hasli and Lauterbrunnen valleys held on the neutral ground of the Wengen Alp. They left Lauterbrunnen two days later and ascended the Rottal intending to cross the Lowinen Thor over the formidable barrier that separates the Rottal from the valley of the Aletsch glacier. No-one had previously found a way over the ridge which had proved 'to be so obstinate and serious an obstacle'. Following 'a series of masterly retreats' they completed a successful passage of the Strahlegg and an ascent of the Eiger (3970m). This was followed by a first ascent of the Jungfrau (4158m) by the Rottal Sattel, a route which is still described in modern guide books as avalanche prone and complicated. Having struck the col they found themselves looking down on the Aletsch glacier, ahead to the Mönch and the Fiescherhörner and to the left at the sharp summit of the Jungfrau. Anderegg thought it would be possible to summit via the new route, so from the col they 'made a spirited dash' up the Jungfrau reaching the summit in under an hour.

After a few days' rest Macdonald climbed the Aletschhorn (4195m) and

crossed the Alphubeljoch. The following day he climbed the Dom (4545m) with the Reverend James Riddell and the Reverend James King, fellows of Balliol and Merton colleges, respectively. With Grove and Stephen he climbed the Triftjoch and Les Diablons (3609m) in preparation for the main target of the summer, the Rothorn above Zinal. To while away the hours until a break in the weather they played cricket in the village square at Zinal. It is not clear whether Macdonald was proficient with bat or ball, though it is known that he never represented Eton at cricket. Stephen appears to have been singularly inept as is borne out by his comment that he made 'a brilliant hit to leg (the only one I ever made in my life) off Macdonald's bowling'. By the time the weather had improved Macdonald had been struck down by 'a sharp attack of illness which totally incapacitated him for a difficult expedition'. While Stephen and Grove completed what was perhaps their greatest triumph Macdonald remained behind in Zinal, but recovered sufficiently to cross the Col d'Argentière and summit Mont Blanc.

The following summer Macdonald appears to have taken a shorter vacation and in late July was in Chamonix with Grove and Buxton. Grove had first envisaged an ascent of the Aiguille de Bionnassay in 1863 when staying at the Hotel Royal in Chamonix. On scanning the surrounding mountains with a telescope he discovered a route up the Aiguille de Bionnassay (4052m), described by Moore as 'an exquisitely sharp snow point... one of the loveliest peaks in the Alps'. Grove found two willing accomplices in Macdonald and Buxton who were keen to give it a try as it was 'the only peak passing thirteen thousand feet which had escaped the devastation of the Alpine Club'. The party passed through Les Houches where the only inhabitants were 'a mangy old woman and a paralytic dog'. At the foot of the Bionnassay glacier they came face to face with the mountain, and 'the more we looked at it the less we liked it'. They climbed the steep glacier and in the midst of a thunderstorm ascended the arête connecting Mont Tricot and the Aiguille de Bionnassay and crawled on to the summit. On the walkout Buxton commented that the mountain was still untrodden by the foot of man as 'it was not on our feet we got there'. They reached St. Gervais the following day and lunched at the elegant Spa Hotel. It was noted how 'very cold was our reception at that refined watering place. The high breeding which we are justly told to expect on the continent caused many a glance of supercilious wonderment to be directed at our soiled garments and thick boots... All through dinner we were made to feel we were not in our proper place'. A week later Macdonald, Grove and Buxton with Johann Anderegg, Cachat and the young Peter Taugwalder attempted the traverse from the Col de Miage to Mont Blanc via the Col de Bionnassay and the Dôme du Goûter and in the process opened a new route up Mont Blanc. The reverse of the traverse was successfully completed the following year by the Irish cartographer, Anthony Adams-Reilly.

Macdonald never climbed in the Alps again. He had perhaps been badly shaken by the accident on the Matterhorn in 1865 in which four climbers



The Clubroom of Zermatt. Alpine Club Members, friends and guides outside the Monte Rosa Hotel, (l-r) F Crauford Grove, Leslie Stephen, George E Foster, Rev. J. Robertson, Frank Walker, A.W. Moore, F. Morshead(?), **Reginald S. Macdonald**, John Ball, William Mathews, E.E. Kennedy, T.G. Bonney, John Tyndall, Ulrich Lauener, Alfred Wills, Lucy Walker, Franz Andermatten, Joseph Maquignaz, Peter Taugwalder (son), Peter Perren, 1864. An engraving of a drawing by Edward Whymper, 1864. (*Alpine Club Photo Library, London*)

died. Young Peter Taugwalder, one of the survivors, who was employed by Macdonald just a couple of weeks after the accident, may have spooked him with his account of the fateful descent. William Coolidge, the American climber, in his book *The Alps in Nature and History* written in 1908, recollected: 'that a sort of palsy fell upon the good cause after that frightful catastrophe of July 14, 1865, particularly amongst English climbers. Few in number, all knowing each other personally, shunning the public gaze as far as possible (and in those days it was possible to do so), they went about under a sort of dark shade, looked on with scarcely disguised contempt by the world of ordinary travellers.'

Family commitments may possibly have curtailed his climbing activities. In 1868 he married Emma Grove, the daughter of Sir William Grove, the eminent lawyer and physician, and sister of Florence Crauford Grove, one of his earlier climbing partners. The couple had two daughters, Leila and Zelia. Professional commitments were probably less of an issue. His civil service career was unexceptional and it is unlikely that it would have impinged on his summer seasons in the Alps. Nevertheless, he continued to be involved in climbing. He served on the committee of the Alpine Club from 1866 to 1868 and remained a member of the Club until his death in 1876. His climbing was restricted to the Welsh mountains where he

climbed with other members of the White Rabbit Club founded in 1870 by Charles Mathews to promote winter climbing in Snowdonia.

For reasons which are unclear, but which were perhaps related to his failing health, Macdonald travelled to New York in early 1876. On 7 January he appears on the manifest of the immigrant ship, the SS *Algeria*, which sailed out of Liverpool via Queenstown in Ireland. The manifest included personal details and the passengers' country of origin and the country they intended to emigrate to. In Macdonald's case the country given in both instances was England, suggesting that he always intended to return home.

It is known that he returned to England as he died in London on 26 August 1876 after a long battle with alcoholism. His condition was most likely exacerbated by the death of his wife in 1875 from tuberculosis. His death certificate recorded the cause of death as dipsomania for two years, blood poisoning for six days and cardiac paralysis. His death was intimated in the *Times* on 30 August and short obituary was published in the 1876 *Alpine Journal*¹. The obituary referred to him as an ardent supporter of the Alpine Club and a 'most kindly and genial friend'. Curiously, his death was also mentioned on 17 November 1876 in the *Wanganui Herald* in New Zealand. Following the receipt of papers by Frisco mail from the United States, the *Herald* recorded details of his death and his connections with the MacDonalds of Flodigary, 'a family long lost to sight, but not to memory, in the Western Highlands, and more especially in the Isle of Skye'. He is also commemorated on a brass plaque in Clewer Parish Church, near Windsor and Eton School, which records that he was a descendant of the Gaelic Lord of the Isles. His death marked the end of his line and his daughter Zelia later resigned as heir of line of the house of Kingsburgh.

As previously suggested Macdonald's achievements have not received the recognition they deserve. During the course of his short climbing career he recorded a significant number of ascents and passages and climbed with the best mountaineers and guides of his era. He was an early member of the Alpine Club and was part of the freemasonry of climbing which existed during the early years of the sport. It is with good reason that he appears in the famous engraving of the Club Room of Zermatt of 1864 that includes the great and good of the Golden Age. One can only speculate that had his alpine climbing career continued beyond 1865 whether Macdonald might have become one of the great climbers of his generation.

1. *AJ8*, 120

C A RUSSELL

One Hundred Years Ago

The long spell of mild weather experienced throughout the Alps during the early months of 1913 provided unusually favourable conditions for winter and ski ascents. Mont Blanc and Piz Bernina were both climbed on New Year's Day and other high peaks including Piz Palü and the Finsteraarhorn were ascended during the following weeks. In March Alfred von Martin's party made the first winter and ski ascents of Castor and Pollux; other peaks climbed for the first time with the aid of ski included the east, higher summit of the Liskamm, the Nordend of Monte Rosa and Monte Leone.

After a promising start in June the weather in the principal Alpine regions was unsettled for much of the summer. Although conditions on many high peaks were unfavourable the climbing season was memorable for the expeditions undertaken by Guido Mayer of Vienna and his Cortina guide Angelo Dibona; they completed a number of notable new routes including the north, *Coste Rouge* ridge to the central summit of the Ailefroide in the Dauphiné and, in the Mont Blanc range, the north-east ridge of the Dent du Requin. The Mayer-Dibona routes, which also included the first ascent of the rock peak in the Dauphiné now named Aiguille Dibona, were all outstanding climbs for the period.

In June ceremonies were held to mark the completion of the Lötschberg rail link between the Berne region and the Simplon line in the Rhône valley.

The passage of the Lötschberg Tunnel, in two special trains with electric traction, was effected in 14 minutes without incident.

In September the Swiss and Italian Alpine Clubs celebrated their respective jubilees. The Alpine Club was represented by Captain Farrar at the Swiss festivities in Lucerne and by J E C Eaton at a banquet in Turin.

Many parties were active in other mountain ranges. In the Caucasus a guideless party led by Harold Raeburn joined forces with Rembert Martinson, a young Russian climber who acted as interpreter. Arriving during a long spell of settled weather Raeburn and his companions ascended a number of unclimbed peaks in the Adai Khokh region including Tshantshakhi Khokh (4420m) and later reached the east summit (5621m) of Elbrus.

In Garhwal determined attempts to climb Kamet (7756m) were made in June by Morris Slingsby and C F Meade. Climbing from the west Slingsby reached a height of some 7100m before being defeated by bad weather.