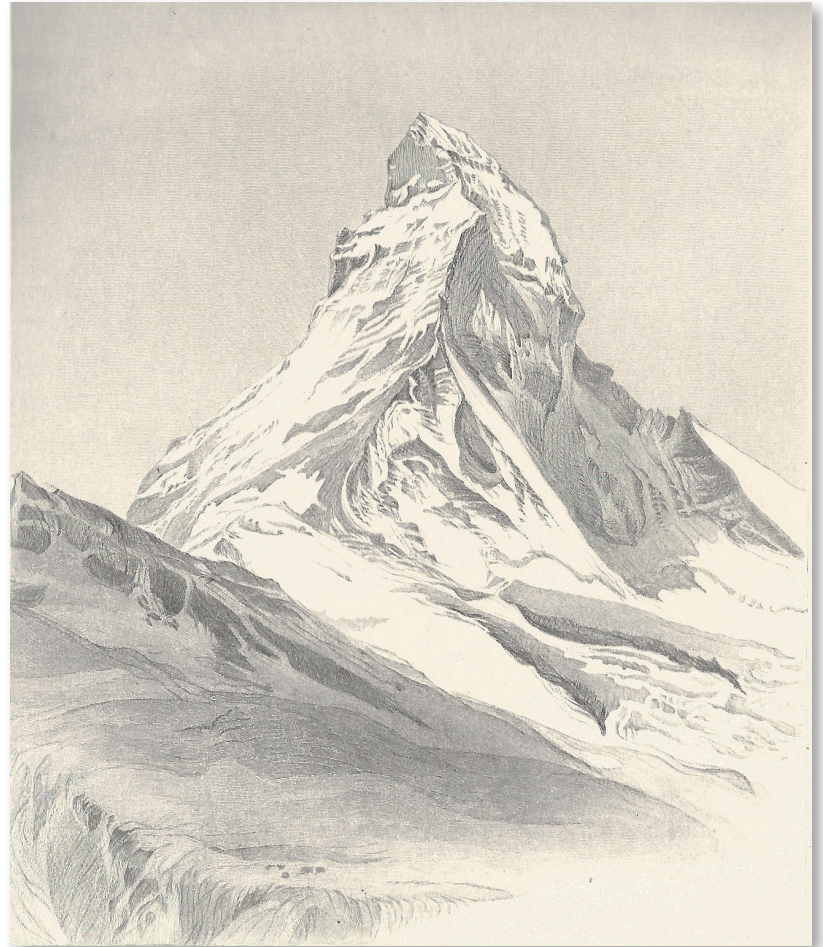

Matterhorn 150



*The Cervin from the North East. The Matterhorn from the Stafelalp. Drawn by John Ruskin, 1849, engraved by J C Armytage. 1856. Engraving. 13 x 11cm. From *Modern Painters. Volume IV, Part 5 – Of Mountain Beauty.* Smith Elder 1856.*

IAN SMITH

14 July 1865



The Matterhorn, with the Hörnli Ridge toward the camera. (*Alex Messenger*)

‘The first ascent of the Matterhorn might have been a brilliant success.’

By the time Edward Whymper wrote those words, in an article published at the end of his life,¹ the events of 14 July 1865 had taken on a dominant place in Whymper’s consciousness. Over the last 20 years of his life he was regularly in Zermatt, and told the story in public lectures on hundreds of occasions. In the journals he now habitually kept, the date of 14 July is usually underlined.

Whymper knew it was the Matterhorn for which he was famous, but privately he was prouder of his ascent of the Aiguille Verte, just two weeks earlier. He had put ten years of his life into his magnificent book describing the mountains of Ecuador, and he always enjoyed telling tales of his

1. Edward Whymper, ‘Mountaineering tragedies,’ *Strand Magazine* 37 (January 1909), 55.

travels in Greenland, but as he got older it was the Matterhorn that came to dominate his life. Staying in Zermatt, Thomas Hardy remembered his first meeting with Whymper, 'when he gave us such a vivid description of the catastrophe,' and Hardy was sufficiently impressed with the story that he wrote a sonnet about the climb.² There are many such accounts of Whymper telling acquaintances the story of that pivotal day in his life, and invariably they followed the same pattern, dwelling on Hadow's inexperience and Hudson's crass over-confidence in bringing his young protégé; but Whymper would often lose himself in the story, as if he were back on the vertiginous slope of the Matterhorn's north side as his life flashed past him. 'The veteran re-told us the story of the Matterhorn accident,' remembered one young climber who met him in Zermatt. 'I shall never forget the old man's almost uncanny, convulsive grip on the corner of the table, and the fierce flash in his eyes as speech suddenly failed.'³

Whymper knew nothing of mountains when he first saw the Matterhorn, but refused to be overawed. The following year he came marching up the valley 'en route for the Matterhorn' (as he signed himself in the Valtournanche inn visitors' book), just 21 years of age, but now thinking he knew everything about mountaineering after an ascent of the Pelvoux, in the Dauphiné. With an inexperienced porter he spent a memorable night on the Col de Lion, and made a first creditable attempt at the Italian ridge. One year later, now a member of the Alpine Club, he left his mark on the south-west ridge, climbing, alone, higher than anyone before him, and feeling that he had some personal ownership of the mountain.

In 1863 Whymper had only two weeks away from work and a single attempt on the Matterhorn's south-east ridge was stopped by the weather. The following year Whymper's mountaineering horizons were widened when he attached himself to Adolphus Moore and Horace Walker, making the first ascent of the Barre des Écrins, then with Adams Reilly a fine series of climbs in the Mont Blanc range. But despite success right across the Alps, work cut short Whymper's summer and the Matterhorn was left untouched in 1864.

In 1865, still only 25 years old, Whymper became a member of the Royal Geographic Society and was already thinking of travel and exploration beyond the Alps. He wrote to Adams Reilly of making one final campaign in the Alps and clearly wanted to finish with the Matterhorn. After his dramatic summer of 1862, during which he did not keep a journal, in 1863 Whymper started recording his Alpine excursions in a small notebook (now in the Scott Polar Research Institute in Cambridge) which he used until the winter of 1868. The entries for 1865 begin on Saturday 10 June:

*'Started from Charing Cross by tidal train, at Paris at 6.45pm. Off again by express to Bale at 8.05pm.'*⁴

2. Richard Little Purdy and Michael Millgate, eds., *The collected letters of Thomas Hardy: volume two – 1893-1901* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 168-9. *Thomas Hardy, Poems of the past and present* (London: Harper and Brothers, 1902).

3. George Abraham, 'Recollections of a great mountaineer and his mountains,' *Fell and Rock Climbing Club Journal* 4, no. 3 (1918): 168-9.

4. Edward Whymper, 'Notes of an Alpine tour in 1865' 10 June, SPRI MS 822/2; BJ.

Whymper managed to record the events of the hectic three weeks which followed, and often gave a good idea of what was going on in his mind and what he thought of his companions – principally Croz, Biener and Almer. After climbing the Grand Cornier and the Dent Blanche, on 21 June a remarkably ambitious (or foolhardy) attempt was made on the south face of the Matterhorn. On 24 June the Grandes Jorasses was climbed for the first time; two days later they crossed the Col Dolent, mountaineering a generation ahead of its time; on 29 June Whymper, Biener and Almer made the first ascent of the Aiguille Verte. Whymper's diary entry for that day ends with his arrival in Chamonix and the astonished congratulations of friends:

Arrive at 8.15pm. Meet Baxter, meet 'Vicar of Bradford'. Guns. Heaps of friends. Kennedy, Glover. Champagne. Perrin, a row brewing. Retire to bed with a dancing head. Warm bath prepared.

The following day contains the penultimate entry in his notebook for 1865, which begins:

30 June. At Chamonix. These days are mixed up in my head in an inextricable jumble. I know that I had my watch mended, my hair cut and that innumerable people talked endless rubbish to me. I know that the weather was abominable and that I was very like the weather.

Late on Sunday 2 July, Whymper walked up to 'Montanvert', and the next day, still with Biener and Almer, made a new crossing to Courmayeur. The last journal entry for the summer describes the start of the day:

An infernal dream ended by Couttet knocking at the door, woke me up an hour after time... The guides were difficult to rouse and we did not get off till 4am. The others (Girdlestone and Co) started a few minutes before. We followed and caught them at the 'Ponts.'

Over the next few days, via a new pass and the first ascent of the Ruinette, the party of three made their way to Breuil, whence Almer and Biener departed for Zermatt. Whymper spent the best part of a week kicking about the Valtournanche but made no attempt to catch up with his diary. After the last entry quoted above there are several blank pages, then a sketch of Lucy Walker with the note: 'Miss Walker as leaving Hotel at Breuil. July 1865.'

Over his life, when keeping a diary or travel journal, Whymper did not make it a regular habit to record each day's events before retiring to bed. His teenage diary, kept from the age of 14 to 19, was often filled in several days at a time, but it is clear that more personal or significant events invariably caused Whymper to dry up. His commission to illustrate Samuel Smiles's life of George Stephenson, for John Murray, sent him to Liverpool, Newcastle and Derby but this two-week break from life in London is one of the few blanks in diary. Another blank follows the entry for 23 March 1859:

'I have just managed to get myself into rather a queer position, as follows.'

This queer position involved a Miss Wilson, but all the reader finds is a column left tantalisingly blank.



Edward Whymper in his late 50s – a studio portrait taken in Chamonix.

When Whymper first travelled to Greenland, two years after the Matterhorn ascent, and later in Ecuador, he determined to do what a good explorer, a fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, should do – keep a regular authoritative journal. He designed for himself official notebooks with pre-printed spaces for the meteorological conditions, but in fact in Greenland he kept a personal diary – now in the Alpine Club archives – as well as this explorer's journal, now with most of his Greenland material in the Scott Polar Research Institute. These two records are interchangeable and both contain accounts of his daily activities, socialising, and comments, mostly unfavourable, on his travelling companions Brown and Tegner. However, when it comes to the defining moment of the whole expedition, the attempt to make a sledging journey into the interior, Whymper is unable to describe their failure, and says nothing of their brief sortie with the sledges – even though space is given to the howling of the dogs, the difficulties of cooking, and the shitting habits of the Greenlanders.

Thirteen years later, Whymper's two pre-printed journals recording his exploration of Ecuador give a fascinating account of the practicalities, his own thoughts and feelings, his difficult relationship to the two Carrels, and are complete but for one blank day, 4 January 1880, when he and the Carrels made the first ascent of the highest mountain then known to have been climbed, Chimborazo. Whymper clearly intended to write up the events of the day in his journal, but never did, although the following day, spent lying in the tent, has a long entry which records 'passed greater part of day in writing up notes.'⁵ Their second ascent of Chimborazo, six months later, is fully described.

Why did Whymper record nothing in his journal after leaving 'Montanvert' on 3 July 1865? The sketch of Lucy Walker (whose father and brother, on 15 July, the day that Whymper returned in tears to Zermatt, were in the party making the first ascent of the Brenva Spur) rather indicates that Whymper was happy to sit about passing the time with acquaintances, but he does not bother to mention the ascent of the Ruinette, or his confused dealings with Carrel over these days. Although his first meeting with Girdlestone on 2 July is described, and Girdlestone



The thin line used to join Lord Francis Douglas and the older Peter Taugwalder. Whymper and Hudson had discussed using this rope as a fixed line on descent but somehow it ended up as a climbing rope. (Ed Douglas)

5. Edward Whymper, 'Journal and general notes in Ecuador, 1879-80,' 5 January 1880, SPRI MS 822/7/1; BJ. A page is left blank for 4 January.

then played a significant part in the events leading up to the Matterhorn ascent, walking over the Théodule Pass with Whymper and Douglas on 12 July, he is not mentioned again. Whymper was still quite casual about keeping a journal, and probably in 1865 had no thought of writing a book on his mountaineering. (He always intended to write a book about Greenland, but this came to nothing.) Perhaps he thought he was going to climb the Matterhorn with Carrel, and full of confidence after such a triumphant summer so far, was waiting to tell a story of resounding success.

His letter to the president of the Swiss Alpine Club, sent from Inter-laken on 25 July, is his first written account of the Matterhorn ascent. Two weeks later, back at his father's house in Haslemere, Whymper wrote a long letter to *The Times* describing in a matter-of-fact way the first ascent of the Matterhorn, the accident and the subsequent events in Zermatt.⁶ Once he had written this long piece, it became established as Whymper's account, and re-appeared six years later, with minor changes, in *Scrambles amongst the Alps*.



Croz's grave in the Zermatt cemetery.
(Ed Douglas)

Twelve months later, now well into his preparations for the exploration of Greenland, he returned to the Alps to investigate in situ the formation of glaciers. There were many places he could have done this, but the location he chose was the Col de Valpelline, an easily reached pass giving a splendid panorama of the Dent d'Hérens and the Matterhorn. Whymper pitched his tent part way up the path from Zermatt, directly opposite the north face of the Matterhorn, from where he could supervise his workmen, braving the cold and wind on the col to dig a hole in the ice. He could not have chosen a better, or more imposing, place to dwell on the events of the year before. Taking up again his mountaineering notebook, this time he leaves a full account of his struggles in poor weather to sample the depth of the glacier, the agonies of snow blindness, the lack of enthusiasm of his workmen, and the companionship he received from the Seilers (particularly Katharina), but makes no direct comment on the Matterhorn, although it hangs like an unspoken presence over the entries.

Whymper was briefly in Breuil and Zermatt in 1869, checking details for his book and then returned with a camera in 1874, this time to make his second ascent of the Matterhorn. With Carrel and Bich, who had both stood on the summit three days after Whymper in 1865, and Lochmatter,

6. Edward Whymper, 'The Matterhorn accident,' *Times*, 8 August 1865.

Whymper climbed again the Hörnli Ridge, spending two nights in the rather squalid cabin now established a couple of thousand feet higher than their 1865 campsite. Whymper kept some pencil notes of this climb on a piece of paper, as eloquent as much for what they do not say as for what they do. Returning from the summit, he sat outside the hut watching the sunset casting its lavender colours over Monte Rosa, inevitably musing on what ought to have happened nine years earlier. Whymper returned two years later to his camping site of 1865, but then work, the Andes and his great book on Ecuador intervened, and it was not until 1892 that he saw the Matterhorn again. He took Franz Biener and his sons up to the 1865 camping site, where they cleared away the rubble and Whymper re-carved the initials he had so exultantly scratched 27 years earlier.

Starting the following year Whymper earned a reasonable income lecturing regularly on his mountaineering with his glass lanternslides, retelling the story of the Matterhorn according to his established narrative. After more than 20 years trying to move on, the Matterhorn now came back to haunt him, and for the last 20 of his life he was regularly in Zermatt. A young Guido Rey, later to write his own book on the Matterhorn, had this experience;

I was descending from the Theodul. Half-way between the Col and the Jomein I saw coming slowly up towards me a fine, tall old man... As I passed him I took off my hat to him, as is the polite custom of those who meet in the mountains. He returned my bow and passed on. My guide had stopped to talk to his. When he rejoined me he whispered, 'Do you know who that is?' I answered that I did not. 'Monsieur Whymper!' And he pronounced the name in a tone of respect. I was as much moved as if I were in the presence of a ghost. I had never seen Whymper except in photographs. I at once turned round to look at him. He had stopped too and was looking at the Matterhorn, whose aspect was one of marvellous grandeur from this point.

I cannot describe how much I was impressed by that meeting in that spot... They were there, the Matterhorn and Whymper, the two great rivals, and the sight of them in each other's presence brought home to one the superiority of the tiny conqueror to the conquered giant. He had come back after thirty years to see once more the mountain that had made him famous.

I would fain have made some sign, have shown him some act of reverence, some proof of my sympathetic interest; have told him that I had read his book again and again ...⁷

After the euphoria of reaching untrodden snow on one of the finest days imaginable, to look down on his defeated rivals, Whymper would be haunted for the rest of his life by the aftermath, and the experience of those few seconds before the rope snapped never would leave him.

- Ian Smith's definitive biography of Edward Whymper, *Shadow of the Matterhorn*, is published by Carreg, £25.

7. Guido Rey, *The Matterhorn*, trans. J. Eaton, rev. R.L.G. Irving (Oxford: Blackwell, 1946), 153-4.