

ROGER BIRNSTINGL

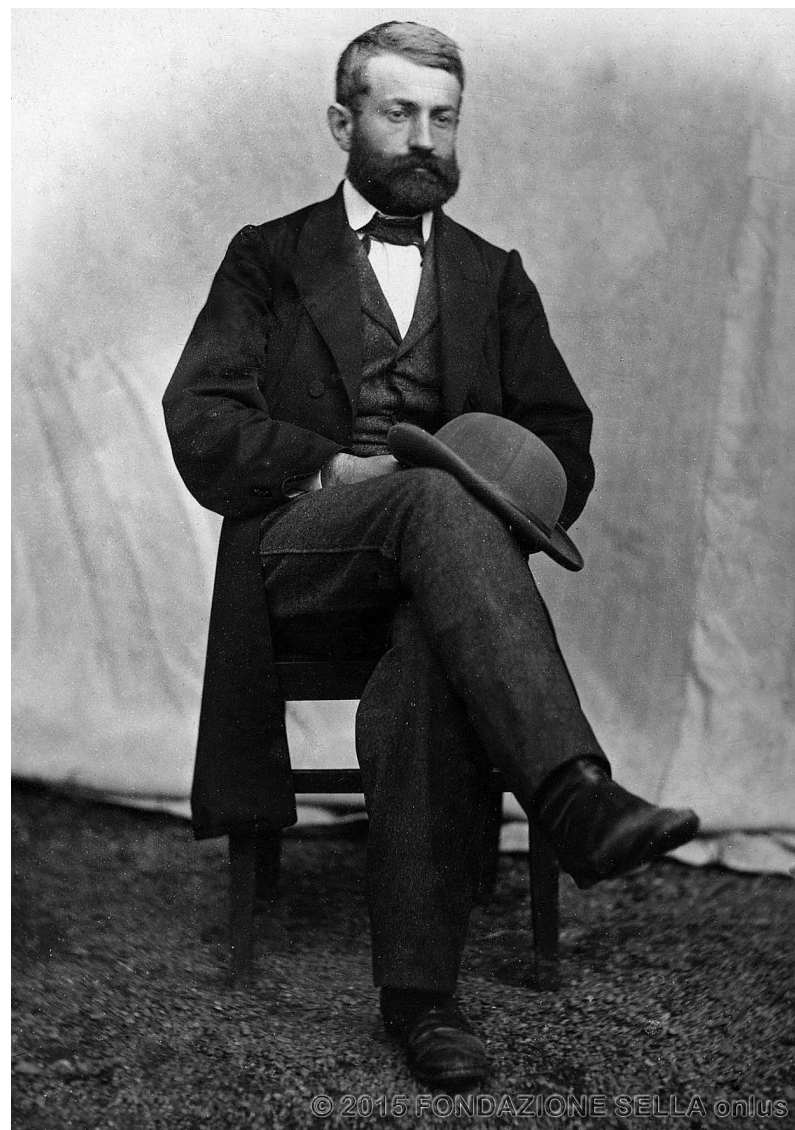
## Letters From The Matterhorn

In the early 1860s the statesman Quintino Sella was finance minister in the government of Italy during the *Risorgimento*. He was a mineralogist, geologist and dedicated alpinist who agreed wholeheartedly with the president Camillo Cavour when he said: 'we have created Italy, now we must create Italians.' For Sella, an essential part of this process was to make first ascents of the great mountains on the Italian frontier. Already Monviso, so obvious from Italy's then capital Turin where Sella was a professor, had been lost in 1860 to William Mathews and with a Chamonix guide, not an Italian one. The remaining and crowning glory was the Matterhorn; it was obvious to Sella that Italians must climb it, and from the Italian side.

In 1980, the Fondazione Sella was established to collect together material relating to the Sella family, so many of whom had been mountaineers or closely associated with mountains, like Guido Rey, Quintino's nephew, the great alpinist and writer, and Vittorio Sella, another of Quintino's nephews and a renowned mountain photographer. In the archive of the Fondazione Sella, among the personal correspondence of Quintino, some letters have recently been unearthed shedding new light on Whymper's account of the first ascent. This cache has been made available to the AC through the generosity of the president of the Sella Foundation, Ludovico Sella, scion of the famous family, and Pietro Crivellaro. Some of these letters must have been seen by Guido Rey for his well researched book *Il Monte Cervino* (1907) but some are new to us.

It is clear Whymper can have had no idea what was going on behind the scenes when he said he had been 'bamboozled and humbugged' by his Breuil (Cervinia) guide Jean-Antoine Carrel. Whymper's account describes how he had engaged Carrel for this, his seventh attempt on the Matterhorn. Yet only a couple of days before the proposed ascent, Carrel told him he could not come because he was committed to a prior engagement with 'a family of distinction'. Whymper was furious but had to accept that he had lost his favourite guide whom he had described as 'the greatest rock climber I have ever encountered.'

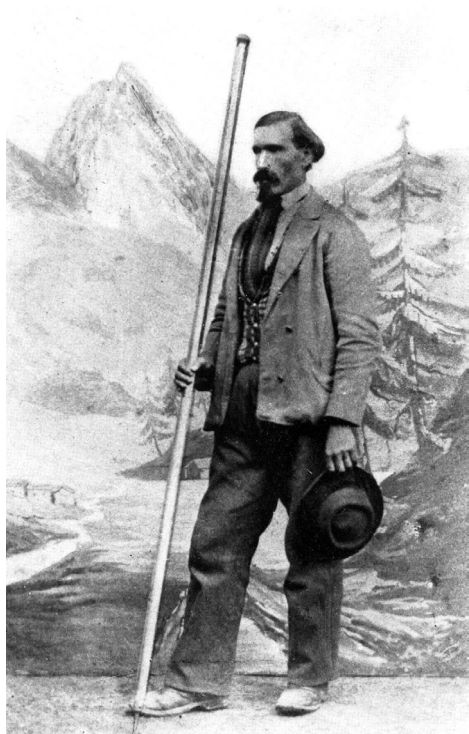
On waking next day he learnt that a large party had already left that morning intent on the Matterhorn and led by Jean-Antoine Carrel. Having found binoculars, Whymper could see the group on the lower slopes of the mountain. This then was the 'family of distinction'. Whymper then hurried over to Zermatt to join forces with Charles Hudson and others, led by the Chamonix guide Michel Croz with whom he had made many previous first ascents including the Barre des Écrins, Aiguille d'Argentière, Grandes Jorasses and Mont Dolent. The story of this, the most famous first



Quintino Sella by Giuseppe Venanzio Sella, 1860. (Fondazione Sella)

ascent made in the Alps and the tragic deaths of three English climbers and Michel Croz, hardly needs retelling here. There is strong reason to suppose that had Whymper climbed in 1865 with Carrel, the ascent would have been a triumph rather than a tragedy caused by an oversized party that included one very inexperienced member – Douglas Hadow.

One needs also to know the name Felice Giordano who had studied at the school of mining in Paris together with Quintino Sella. They became



Jean Antoine Carrel, unknown photographer, published in the CAI journal 1868. (*Fondazione Sella*)

lifelong friends and both were passionate about mountaineering. Sella, as finance minister in the government, had obligations which curtailed his freedom but did not prevent him from helping found the Italian Alpine Club (CAI) in 1863, inspired by the example of the Alpine Club six years earlier.

Jean-Antoine Carrel is the most important man in this story. He was a *bersagliere*, the elite regiment of alpine soldiers who wear black feathers in their hats; Carrel had fought in battles against the Austrians, in particular the *Risorgimento* victory at Solferino in 1859, whose horrors led directly to the Geneva Conventions and the founding of the International Red Cross. He also fought in the

Crimean War. He was therefore a great patriot but as a mountain guide with a considerable family to support, he was obliged to work very often with foreign climbers and in particular with climbers from the British Isles.

Felice Giordano wrote to Quintino that he considered Carrel a very fine climber but somewhat venal and indeed the evidence tends to suggest that Carrel on several occasions persuaded his clients to abandon attempts even when the summit was within striking distance. This happened in 1862 to John Tyndall after getting to the south-west shoulder peak, now called Pic Tyndall and to Whymper in 1863. Could it be that he thought the Matterhorn, once climbed, would be less attractive to his prospective clients and that it was in his interest to keep it virgin? It is significant that only three days after Whymper's success he reached the peak from the Italian side with a four-man party. Giordano had wished to be in that group but Carrel refused to let him come saying he could not cope with a 'tourist'. Perhaps Giordano should have offered him a better fee but instead he remained in Breuil desperately disappointed. On their return, when the entire village was *en fête*, a miserable Giordano left Breuil and descended the valley.

It would be interesting to know whether Carrel was held responsible for missing opportunities of getting to the summit of the Matterhorn *per l'Italia*. From perusing the letters I do not get the impression that he was, although in 1877 when the guide Giuseppe Maquignaz was climbing with

the Sella family, he spoke of the climb on the Italian side when Whymper was making his attempt from Zermatt. He told how he had been putting in pitons (actually nails) and fixing ropes on the Grande Tour below Pic Tyndall which involved carrying some 25kg on his back. He wanted to dump the sack and get on faster. There was an animated discussion and much loss of time. Apparently Carrel was so convinced that Whymper had no hope of success from Zermatt that he simply was not hurried.

Some of the letters passed between Giordano and Sella during those vital days in 1865 make things clear. On 7 July Giordano wrote to Sella from Turin:

*I leave for the noted destination heavily loaded. [Author's note: he doesn't mention Breuil.] The day before yesterday I sent up a tent, 300m of rope and various metal hooks together with provisions, an oil-stove to heat water, etc. All this stuff weighs about 100kg and as it must go on a cart from Ivrea to Châtillon it won't arrive until this evening or tomorrow. Also I am sending 200 lire to Carrel so that he can transport it all to Val Tournanche or Breuil. I should be there tomorrow in order to supervise the matter. I will take another tent and barometers including your own. When I am there I shall write to you. Only think about yourself, which means bringing a good overcoat, two or three blankets, good cigars and wine and don't forget the cash because I can't carry more than 300 lire. Let's get on and attack this devil mountain and let us succeed if only Whymper does not get there first!*

The next letter is dated 11 July when Giordano, having now arrived in Breuil, wrote to Sella:

*I sent letters, ropes and other equipment to Carrel on the fifth hoping to find him in Châtillon [in the Aosta valley] but he wasn't there as letters are taking an incredible time to get to the Val Tournanche (they only arrived on 9 [July]). So on the eighth I found the ropes and other provisions in Châtillon and sent them up with mules. At midday I was in Val Tournanche and found Carrel just returned from an exploration on the mountain but had given up in bad weather. Whymper, who had already been there for some days, engaged Carrel who had not received my letters. Fortunately the weather was bad and Whymper was unable to make this attempt. Carrel cancelled his engagement and came with me with five men amongst the best in the valley.*

*A preliminary expedition was organised straightaway with these men and Carrel in control. We got the ropes and other stuff out of sight by taking them up the mountain to a hut, which serves as a base camp. From here two men climbed and fixed ropes whilst two acted as porters. I won't write more details for the moment and am established at Breuil at 2000 metres.*

*The weather (our terrible god on which all depends) is very variable. Yesterday morning it was again snowing on the Cervino but by the evening had cleared up. On the night of 10-11 July six men left with tents etc and I hope at this moment are high up on the mountain. The weather is changing again and the mountain is in cloud but I hope for clear passages.*

*Weather permitting, ie good, I hope in three to four days to have good news. Carrel told me not to climb with him and to await news. Naturally he wants to be assured about the last problems of the climb. Looking at them from here I don't feel they are insurmountable but before we can say anything definite we need to 'touch' them which means finding a bivouac site higher than Whymper's highest.*

*So as soon as I know something definite I will send an express message to St Vincent from where a telegram will be sent to you. Then you must come immediately because the atmosphere here changes from hour to hour [literally from six hours to six hours in the Italian] and it's a desperate situation. When you receive this be kind enough to send me a couple of lines. My greatest worry is the weather, the excessive expenses (each man must be paid 20 lire per day of work plus his food), and Whymper.*

*I have tried to keep everything secret but this individual whose very life seems to depend on the Cervino is prying into everything. I have taken away all the capable men but nevertheless he could still try to get others or at least make a great scene. He is here in the hotel but I try everything not to talk to him. So in short I am doing everything to help us succeed. That the Greek gods should help us!*

*I won't write more hoping soon to be able to give you good news. Even so I hope at least that these Alpine matters get your mind off ministerial and Turin business. Your affectionate Giordano.*

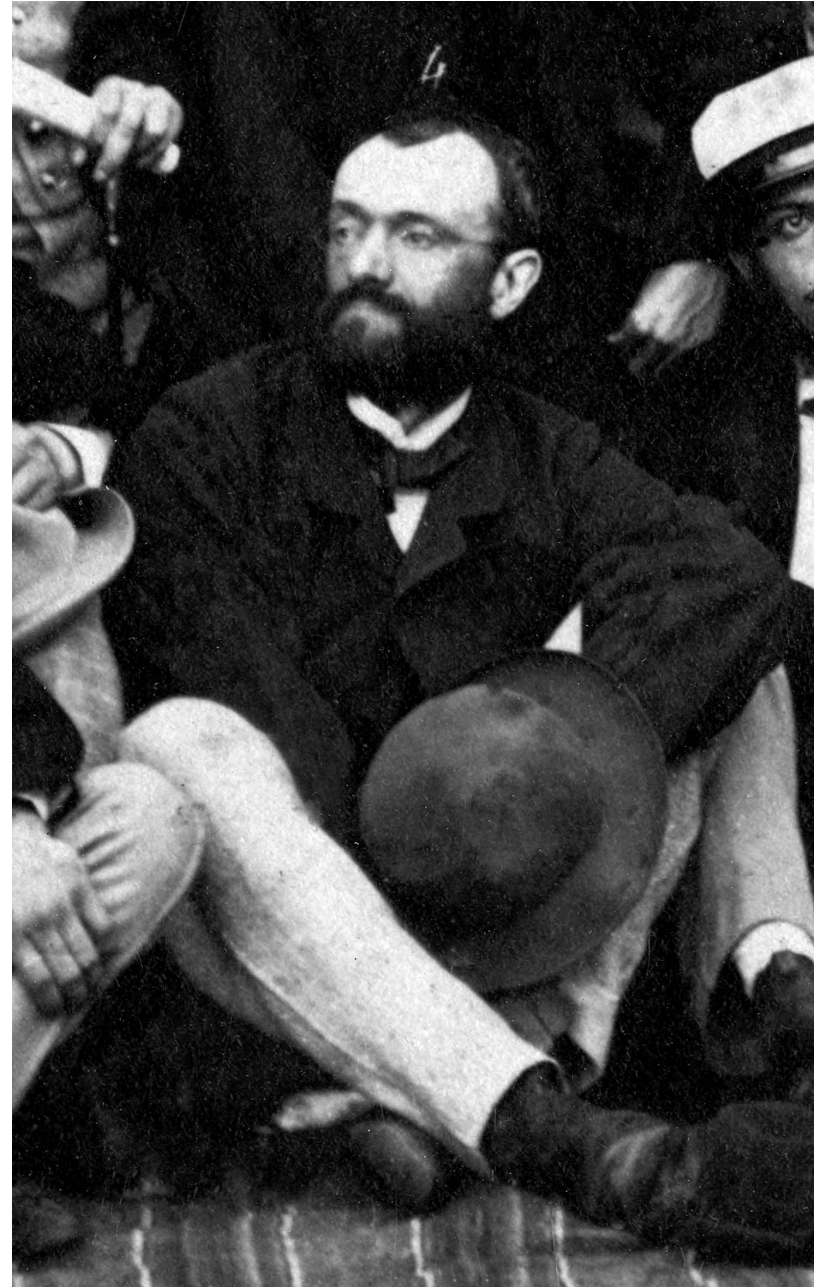
What is interesting about these two letters is that they make it quite clear the original plan was for the two friends, Quintino Sella and Felice Giordano, to make an almost 1920s Himalayan-style attack on the mountain. Carrel and other guides would achieve the first ascent and having equipped it suitably with fixed ropes and pitons the friends would make a second ascent. This is why Giordano did not go with the party that left on 11 July.

Whymper writes in *Scrambles in the Alps* that having descended the Val Tournanche on 9 July to see a sick Englishman, he meets 'a foreign gentleman' together with Carrel and others. This must have been Giordano but the meeting is not referred to in the latter's letter of 11 July. On 14 July Giordano writes:

*Dear Quintino,*

*Today at 2pm with good binoculars I saw Carrel and company on the extreme summit of the Cervino. There were several people with me and thus one can say that the success seems certain in spite of all the snow that fell the day before yesterday. Whymper left to try from the other side but I think in vain. The trouble is that I don't know where you are and have had no news for more than eight days. If you don't come or telegraph me before tomorrow I shall have to ascend the mountain myself and plant the Italian flag on the summit as is very necessary. However I would rather wait so that you can be with me.*

This is Giordano on the following day and in a very different mood:



Felice Giordano, photographed by Vittorio Besso in 1864. (Fondazione Sella)

Dear Quintino,

Yesterday was an awful one; Whymper made it against the unhappy Carrel. Whymper in desperation and seeing Carrel starting up the mountain made this attack from Zermatt. Everyone thought it impossible from that side including Carrel and therefore was unconcerned. On 11 July Carrel climbed to a fair height but that night and the whole of the twelfth were horrible with snow. The thirteenth was better and 14 July fine. On the thirteenth some work was done (ie fixing ropes) and on the fourteenth Carrel could have been on the summit but at about 2pm he saw Whymper and six others had arrived. Whymper must have promised a fortune to the various Swiss guides to pull him up and with the luck of the weather he was successful.

I tried to get a message through to Carrel that Whymper was also making an attempt and that he should make all haste and not waste any time. This did not get to him and in any case Carrel did not think it possible from the north.

Poor Carrel when he saw he had been preceded did not have the courage to continue and descended with arms and baggage [arms and baggage]. He arrived here this morning so I send this express to stop you from coming.

You see in spite of all our efforts this is a lost battle and I am desolate in the extreme.

Perhaps there is one way to avenge this. Someone must climb the mountain from our side, which will show that it is indeed possible, as Carrel believes. I am just a bit angry with him for having brought all the equipment back down which had been taken up with so much fatigue to about 200m below the summit. He will put the blame on the whole group which was so discouraged and feared that I wouldn't come up with more cash.

However I don't want to put blame on anyone. What is important, as I said, is to plant the flag up there. I shall try to organise another expedition but apart from Carrel and one other, there is no cuore [heart] for another attempt. Without that, there is not a lot of hope.

Still, I am trying to organise another bash and hope to keep it as economical as possible. Again I won't get the satisfaction of climbing myself as Carrel has said that it is better to go without 'tourists'. The weather is still very variable. What tribulations!

Yesterday the entire valley was en fête thinking 'our men' had made it and today comes the disillusion. Poor Carrel so much believed it impossible to succeed from the north that he had not been in enough haste.

The expenses have been really tough and I must implore you to help me out a bit.

Your F G

On a scrap of paper he added:

In spite of everything that has happened you still could make the ascent yourself if you can find the time but until now Carrel has not been able to really assure me of the feasibility of the last part of the climb.

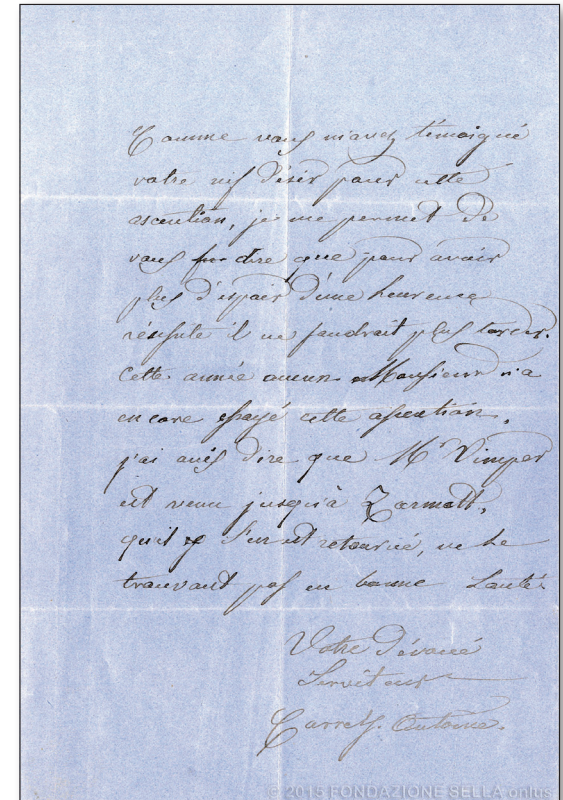
Giordano wrote again on 16 July having now heard of the terrible tragedy of Whymper's descent, during which the famous Chamonix guide

Michel Croz and 'three tourists' fell to their deaths. He believes Whymper had cut the rope that attached him to the others. Because of this accident he wrote that at least tourists would be put off from trying again from Zermatt.

He laments that Carrel turned back when he was so close to the summit, which means that it all has to be done again. Then he says that by getting sufficiently angry he had managed to organise a party, which had left that very morning. He couldn't get everyone from the first attempt to go this time but was pleased to have procured the Abbé Gorret, godson of Jean-Antoine Carrel, who was reputed to be as good as any guide. (He certainly proved a godsend as a climber and what is more, persuaded the others on the party not to accept a fee and climb for the honour of their country. This must have been good news for Giordano.) He goes on to say that all this has made him ill and he has no appetite. He intends to go to Turin at the first opportunity but needs to have the result of this last try for the summit.

The next letter we have is indeed from Turin, dated 20 July, saying that he had left Breuil the previous day in hopeless weather and had come to Turin hoping to find Quintino but had heard that he had left for Florence. (Sella was trying to keep the capital of Italy in Turin but in vain; it was moved to Florence and to Rome in 1873.)

He writes: 'I wanted to tell you that if you still wish, it is not too late to climb the Cervino with the honour of being the first Monsieur to have done it...' After lamenting that he had to remain in the valley while the new attempt was made, he writes how the caravan left on 16 July and at 2pm 'our flag was on the summit. Apparently the difficulties near the top were not too bad but Carrel wants to fit some climbing aids to make it easier



The second page of a letter from Carrel to Quintino sent in 1864, the year before the first ascent, telling him that the mountain was in prime condition for an attempt. (Fondazione Sella)

before he takes any tourists up. That same evening the weather turned really bad with sleet and snow so I decided to come down to Turin.' He again says how disappointed he is not to have put his feet on the summit and has to content himself with a piece of rock, some sort of yellow mica, which Carrel had brought down. 'Val Tournanche is really *en fête* again with music and dancing; even a song has been composed with the words: *C'est un monsieur Italien / Qui a vaincu le Mont Cervin.*'

No more attempts were made that year. The previous year, Quintino Sella, who lived in Biella, which was not such a distance from Val Tournanche, had asked Carrel to go there in person. It is not clear what passed at that meeting but shortly afterwards, on 7 August, Carrel wrote to Sella saying that the mountain could not be in better conditions for a summit attempt and that Sella should come to Breuil as quickly as possible. He also mentions that 'Vimper' had returned to London. (This was because Whympers's mother had died).

Unfortunately Sella was unable to go, being involved with state matters and suffering from some sort of infection in his leg that kept him in bed. It could be argued that the battle was lost then in 1864 with the great Sella *hors du combat*. It was he who so much wanted this conquest for the honour of the *Nuova Italia* and in a way is an illustration of the growth in importance of competitive sport between nations, which became so important from the end of the nineteenth century.

Quintino Sella's own ambitions for the mountain were not realised until some twelve years later when, for his fiftieth year, he finally made the ascent with his two sons, a nephew, Jean-Antoine Carrel and no less than three other renowned guides. Giordano, who was not a state minister and had more time, attempted it again in 1866 but was blocked 'for several days' at Pic Tyndall before having to descend. Returning in 1867 he was beaten by the weather. It was not until 1868 that he finally achieved his ambition. His friend Quintino was delighted and popularised the geological studies that Giordano had made on the structure of the Matterhorn. After the disappointment of it not being an Italian making the first ascent, he hoped at least it could be Italy at the forefront of Alpine geological research.

Elsewhere in the archive are plenty of letters from later years including ones of jubilation when Sella climbed the Monviso and indeed the Matterhorn and correspondence relating to the invitation of King Vittorio Emanuele, himself a great lover of the mountains, to accept the presidency of the CAI – and a gift to him of Whympers's books. There is plenty of scope here for future research.

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JOHN CLEARE

## Made For Television

### The Matterhorn Centenary

The centenary of the Matterhorn's first ascent in 1965 was, the Swiss declared, to be 'The Year of the Alps'; marked by frolics, fun and festivities throughout the country. Radio Geneva's input was to be nothing less than a televised ascent of the Matterhorn on 14 July on the very day, even the very hour, of the anniversary that would be transmitted around the world.

Ambition is one thing, practicality another. The Swiss had little experience of this kind of thing so the BBC, with its live outside broadcast expertise, was invited to assist. Fifty years ago there was no colour television, let alone digital imaging, and live 'OBs' were still a fraught art, demanding very different treatment from film or even video recording. Knowing the size of the mountain and the fickleness of the weather, the project seems foolhardy in retrospect. But nothing ventured, nothing gained. Hamish MacInnes and I were drafted in to handle the task.

Actually, there were four of us, since each portable radio-camera required a two-man team. The camera itself was cabled to a large metal pack on the cameraman's back, whence more cables linked to another heavy transmission box carried by the second man, and onwards to an aerial. Our respective assistants, or 'tweakers', expected to hold the ropes, man the radios and tune in the transmitter, were our respective climbing partners, Davy Crabbe and Rusty Baillie.

Spring was late in 1965 and the Matterhorn hadn't yet been climbed that year. Up at the Hörnli Hut the snow was deep, soggy and uneven. Pandemonium reigned at the Belvedere Inn, temporarily turned into a television control-room, where engineers, technicians, directors, producers and celebrities were shouting in their own languages at no one in particular. It was clear few of them had been on a mountain before and many were suffering from altitude. Not surprisingly we had already decided to camp and we pitched our tents in falling snow among boulders a little way above the hut.

Snow fell for several days while we were briefed on our tasks; as the nature of the enterprise became clear, we realised how impractical the arrangements were to carry it out. There would be two large static TV cameras with telephoto lenses, one on a railway flatcar at the Gornergrat some five miles from the mountain, and another, airlifted in, close by the hut but still four thousand feet below the summit and a mile distant. The detail of the climb itself, the personalities, their commentary, the chat and the close-ups, would depend entirely on our two cameras sending back