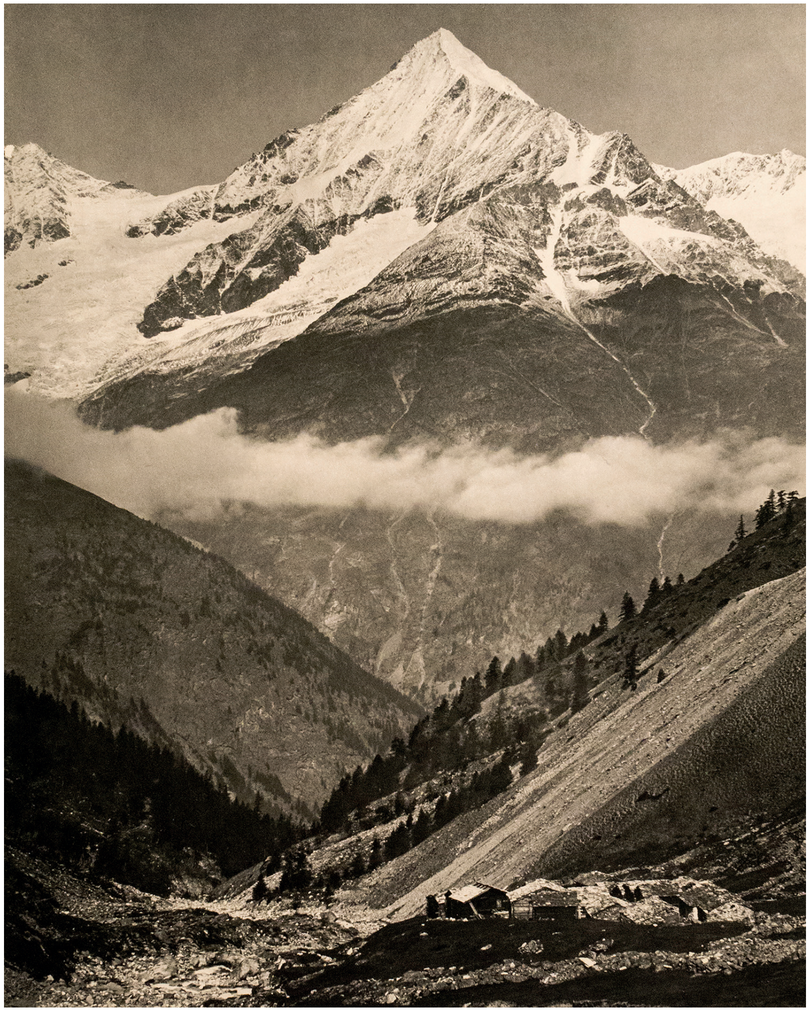
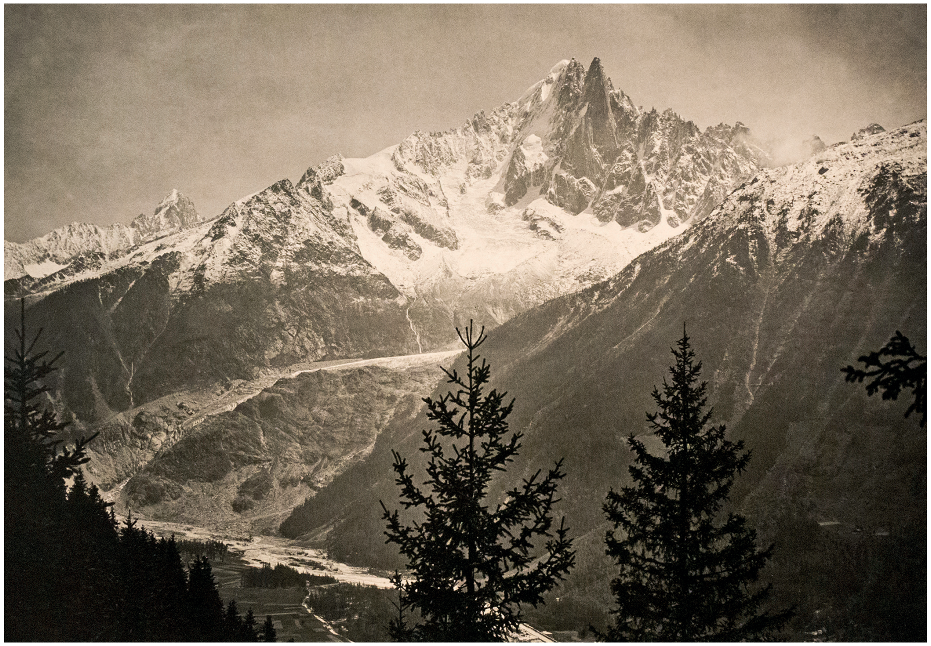
JOHN CLEARE

Some Thoughts on Mountain Photography



The Weisshorn from above Wildi by William Donkin: a powerful composition using the natural geometry. Note how the shape of the mountain is echoed – inverted – by the interlocking spurs, always a good ploy, while the hay huts establish a positive foreground. *(Alpine Club Photo Library)*

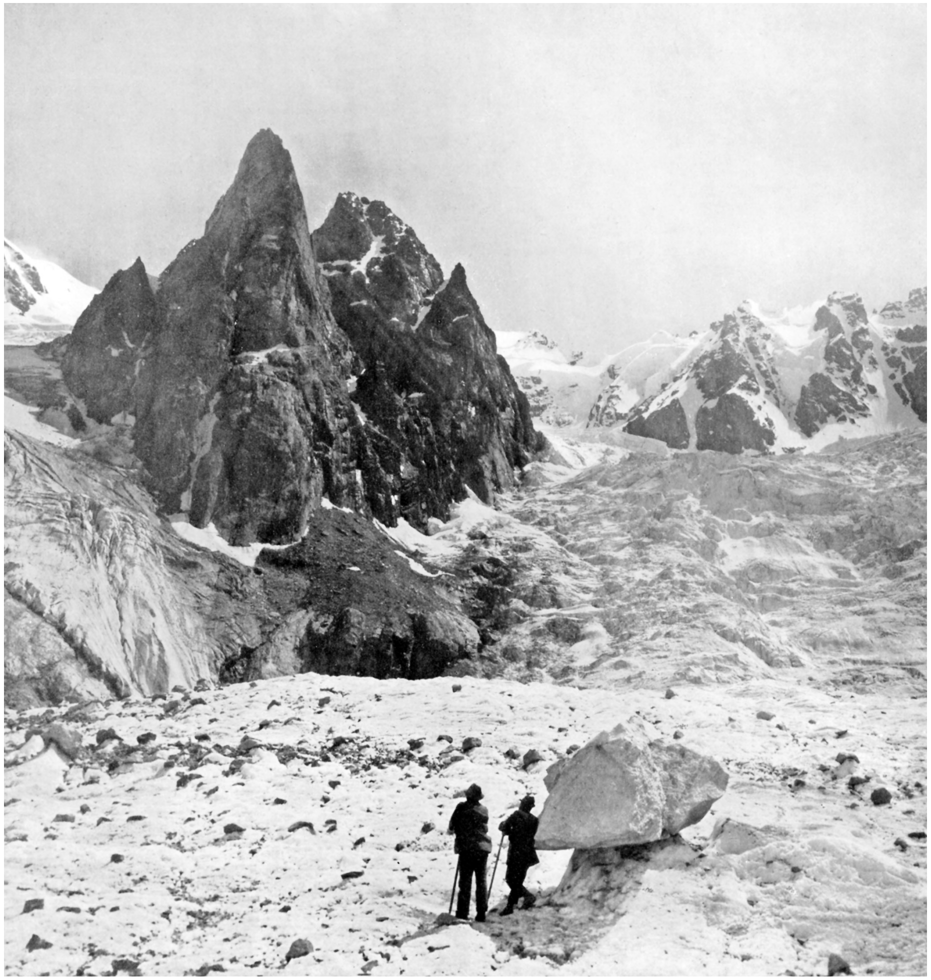


Were it not for the pristine Dru, the glacier snout and the undeveloped Chamonix valley, this fascinating picture of Donkin's could well be a contemporary composition. The Montenvers shoulder forms a natural middle-distance while the foreground is anchored by the pine trees, obviously carefully arranged to overlap the dark shoulder; although if my camera position allowed, I'd have moved the tree top slightly more left to avoid the convergence of powerful lines. *(Alpine Club Photo Library)*

'From today painting is dead!' the French painter Paul Delaroche claimed in 1839, taken aback at seeing early Daguerreotype images – the first photographs. But while painting remained as vital as ever, the revolutionary art of photography, essentially painting with light, the offspring of physics and chemistry rather than pigment and artifice, developed apace.

Photographs were taken *on* the mountain, as opposed to of the mountains, quite early on: the first were possibly shot in 1860 on the summit of Mont Blanc, the work of Joseph Tairraz, progenitor of the celebrated dynasty of Chamonix photographers. In 1865 the Rev H B George, editor of the *Alpine Journal* no less, took Ernest Edwards, a London professional, around the Oberland glaciers to shoot pictures for a book. The fledgling *Alpine Journal* was swift to use the new art form, publishing Edwards' work as its first photograph, 'The Jungfrau from Steinberg Alp', in 1865, just two years into the *Journal*'s publication.

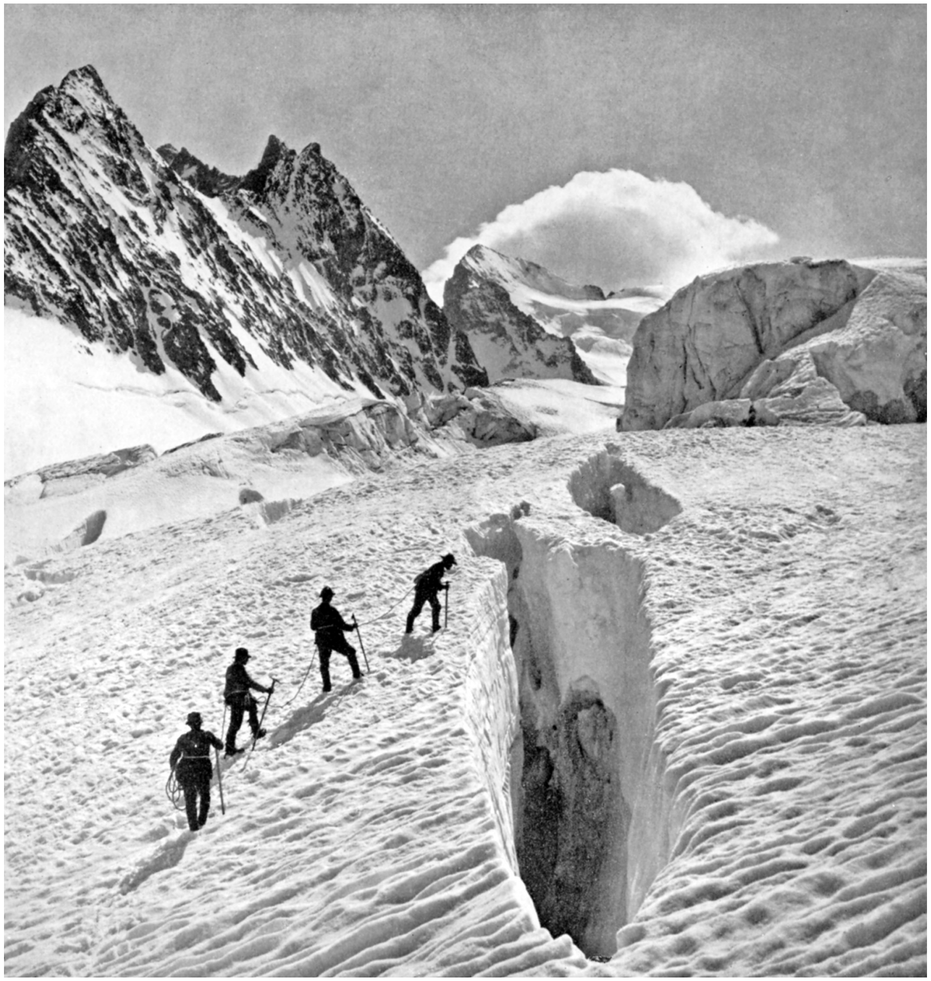
Cameras in the second half of the 19th century, though large and heavy, were handsome instruments of mahogany and brass with surprisingly good optics and mechanisms, but the lengthy exposures necessary demanded unwieldy tripods. Lens panels were mounted on leather bellows while



I like this picture. Vittorio Sella shot this on the Songuta Glacier, probably during his 1898 Caucasus foray. It has a casual air about it while still being a useful geographical illustration. Sella has manoeuvred to balance the foreground glacier table with the powerful background shapes and I can just hear him cry: 'Lean on the rock! Relax! Now hold that pose for ten seconds.' *(Alpine Club Photo Library)*

lenses were focused on a ground glass screen with the photographer's head shrouded under a 'dark-cloth'. There was scope for innovation and the Rev George invented his own miniature camera that weighted only 4lb and fitted onto his ice axe; it never caught on.

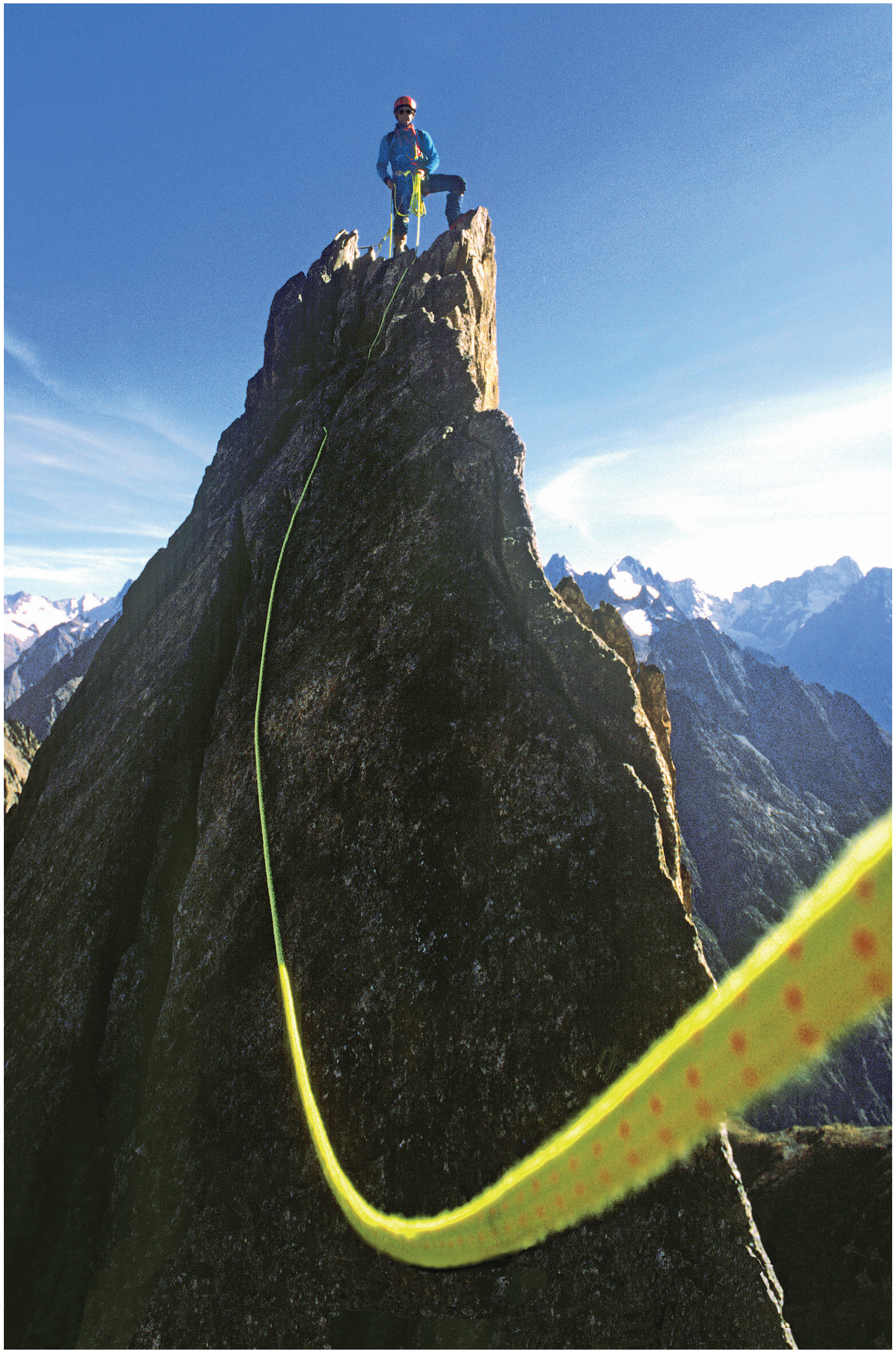
A major constraint was the 'collodion process', coating a plate in a wet chemical mix of iodide and cellulose nitrate on which the image was recorded. The fragile glass plates had to be coated immediately before exposure and processed immediately afterwards. They also took a long time to absorb light.



Sella's classic 1888 picture on the Glacier Blanc in the Dauphiné: the faultless composition has great depth, holding interest all the way from the foreground to the Écrins massif in the far distance. While the figures are perfectly placed, the leader's inquisitive stance – held for the longish exposure – is the touch of a master, adding a completely new dimension. *(Alpine Club Photo Library)*

In 1879 Vittorio Sella constructed a rudimentary darkroom on the summit of Monte Mars, a notable rock peak of 2,600m near Aosta, in order to shoot a 360° panorama of the Pennine Alps. He used 30cm x 36cm glass plates in a camera weighing over 30lb. However, 'faster' dry plates using a gelatine base were under development, and when Sella shot his 12 plate panorama from the Matterhorn summit three years later, he was able to use them.

Sella (1859-1943) was a master technician with a true artist's eye, adept at placing small figures in just the right place to give scale to his compositions.



His English friend William Donkin (1845-1888), an equally outstanding photographer, was hon secretary of both the AC and the Royal Photographic Society. A dark room wizard, Donkin's superb prints have remained immaculate in the AC's collection, comparing favourably with duotone prints of a century later. On an alpine day Donkin preferred to carry his own camera gear, leaving the essential tripod, the climbing gear and the sandwiches to his guides. He was famed for his speed of operation: 'ten minutes was all he needed to make a shot!' Had Donkin not disappeared on Koshtan-Tau during his second Caucasus expedition, it's likely his fame would at least have equalled that of Sella. But with exposure times of many seconds, minutes even, true action images were beyond even their contemporary equipment.

As mountaineering and rock climbing evolved and more difficult routes were climbed, so too did the technology and performance of cameras and film – and the ambition of photographers to record what they were doing rather than merely what they saw. One of the first action climbing photographs known was shot in 1893 by Lily Bristow showing Mummery fighting his eponymous crack on the Grépon. There's no record of the camera she used, but unable to erect her tripod on the small stance, she relied instead on Geoffrey Hastings' head for support.

After dry plates came the invention in 1884 of flexible roll film by George Eastman; the firm Eastman Kodak was established in 1892. Soon small, simple, highly portable roll-film cameras appeared. Aimed at the general public, initially the cameras had to be returned to Kodak for processing. Eastman claimed: 'You press the button, we do the rest.' It's difficult to make a mundane mountain or crag situation appear dramatic and exciting – should that be your aim – but by the turn of the century there were climbs that were photogenic and cameras and film that could record climbers climbing them. Though the results were pretty rough, by 1900 many alpinists carried such cameras and the two decades before the First World War saw the first climbing photographs to depict action.

In Britain the Abraham brothers, George (1872-1965) and Ashley (1876-1951), professionals based in Keswick, dominated not only the mountain photography scene before 1914, but also played a major role in the exploration of British rock, proving it was possible to be both a dedicated photographer and a leading climber. Their equipment was little different, if rather more sophisticated, from that of twenty years earlier; they still used glass plates and a tripod remained axiomatic. For that reason they were still unable to portray action as we see it today.

Left: The Aiguille Dibona in the Écrins massif, well known for its magnificent south face routes, must boast one of the smaller summits in the Alps. Here Ian Howell is organising the rope before starting down the narrow north ridge, which is the easy way off. The picture is an excellent example of using 'rope out of camera' to involve the viewer in the action, rather than being a mere onlooker. It also gives depth to the pictures, a third dimension to what would otherwise be a figure posed on a shadowed pinnacle. *(John Cleare)*

Nevertheless they managed to shoot real climbers posing in steep and difficult-looking situations, in so doing exposing themselves to singular hazards: twice, emerging disoriented from under the dark-cloth, Ashley stumbled and fell from exposed stances, only to be saved by a belay. Their many pin-sharp photographic 'studies' and their nine books did much to popularise rock climbing in Britain, but I see their work as essentially the successful culmination of all that had gone before, rather than ground-breaking innovation.

Roll film was all very well but there was no means of keeping it perfectly flat behind a camera lens. Yet the fledging movie industry was already using film punched with sprocket holes to ensure constant take-up speed, and in 1908 an English inventor patented a system tensioning 35mm movie film in still cameras, thus solving the problem. Five years later, in Germany, Oskar Barnack, an asthmatic who struggled to carry heavy equipment, developed the Leica to exploit the invention.

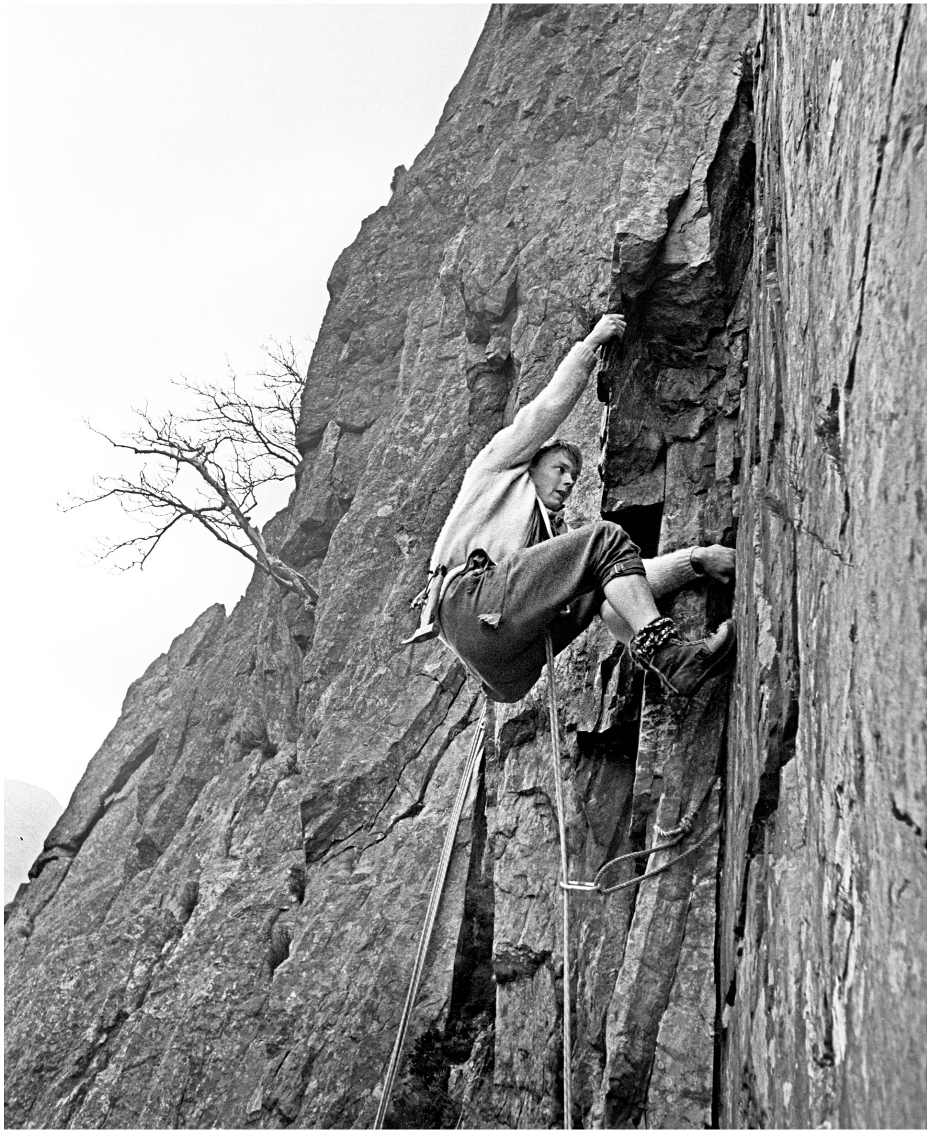
Delayed by the war, the first production Leica appeared in 1925 and became the iconic 35mm stills camera. Its rangefinder focusing involved aligning two tiny images while the photographer aimed though a small viewfinder window, seeing only approximately what the lens saw. Yet it was small, compact, swift to use and silent; it could also shoot 36 frames on a single cassette and several interchangeable lenses were available. Leicas, and other German 35mm cameras such as the Contax, remained the workhorse of many notable photographers for over forty years and though the small 24mm x 36mm negatives were considered unsuitable for serious landscape work, photographing climbing action of every kind was now possible.

In a half-century photography had progressed from the alchemy of Donkin and Sella to a popular art form mastered by everyman, though its workings remained magic to most. In the 1930s and after the Second World War, medium-format cameras shooting a 60mm wide negative such as the Rolliflex, and later the Hasselblad, became the preferred option for most professional photographers, giving results comparable to all but the largest glass plates. But though highly portable and often hand-held, they were still rather a handful and not very practical for mountain use. Frank Smythe, pre-eminent British mountain photographer of the 1930s, used a Patent Etui, an innovative folding German camera virtually the same size as a Nikon FM body that 'packed a huge negative into the smallest possible package'. It weighed just 500g and used a pack of 12 sheets of 9cm x 12cm film: 12 times the area of a Leica negative. Despite focus being by estimation and aiming rather arbitrary, the camera was equal to Smythe's artistic vision. He used it to interpret rather than merely record situations and scenes that had never before been photographed.

After the Second World War, handheld light meters were universal and it was no longer necessary to judge exposure from experience. Unfortunately in Britain, unlike in America, most publishers distrusted 35mm photography and the print unions often refused to work from 35mm originals. However, the Japanese had been busy and during the Korean War the innovative modern Japanese 35mm SLR was 'discovered' by war photographers picking up a spare camera as they passed through Tokyo. While possessing many of the useful attributes of the Leica, albeit slightly larger and noisier, the versatile Nikons, Canons and others could accept a virtually unlimited range of lenses from very wide angle to long telephoto, and were aimed through the lens itself. You saw exactly what the camera saw. In a few years built-in exposure meters were standard. Advances in film technology allowed properly processed 35mm negatives to equal medium format quality and after years of gestation colour film became a practical medium and almost ubiquitous. By the 1970s several innovative photographers were pushing mountain photography to a high art in both its landscape and action genres. Nothing seemed impossible to photograph.

Eliminate 'A' on Dow Crag in the Lake District is an old favourite, an exposed 400ft VS from 1923. Another example of 'rope out of camera', this picture places the viewer quite definitely on the crag as the belayer – hopefully aware from Ian Howell's expression that the move is demanding serious concentration. It is never easy to pay proper attention to the climber and the camera at the same time, and such pictures, however well planned, must be grabbed swiftly. *(John Cleare)*

Since the millennium, photography, as we of a certain age knew it, died a slow death. Automation replaced professional expertise; computers hijacked the mystique of the darkroom. The camera-phone has become the casual plaything of every Tom, Dick and Harriet. Yet a new photography has been born: digital technology has placed exciting tools and incredible creative techniques in the hands of those imaginative enough to use them, and removed much of the hard graft from mountain photography. No more wondering if that difficult picture has worked. No more fumbling for focus with frozen fingers or changing film while dangling on an abseil rope. No more husbanding every exposure during a long expedition. Forget scratched transparencies. Like the painter's brush, the camera is still a tool, as it always has been. It is the eye behind the camera that makes the picture.



This is an illustration from my 1966 book, the 50th anniversary edition of which is reviewed elsewhere in this *Journal*. It shows Pete Crew in a rather precarious position fighting the crux moves of the Direct Finish to Erosion Groove on Carreg Wastad in Snowdonia. It demonstrates how, especially when shooting in monochrome, the colour of the climber's clothing can make or break a picture. Back then, with a couple of white sweaters in my rucksack, I could cope with any such situation. This was a planned picture in as much as the camera position – merely a couple of small footholds – was reached by abseil specifically to shoot down onto the pitch below and then to get in close on these particular moves. *(John Cleare)*

The photograph is a means of communication, no less so than the written word. Before a shoot, before pressing the trigger, one should have a shrewd idea of the purpose of the shot, a straightforward record perhaps, or something more esoteric? Is the picture to be objective, saying merely *this is the Matterhorn*, or whatever, or subjective – evocative – spelling out the tenseness, the fear even, of a difficult move, or the sublimity of moonlight on the icefall. The viewer can identify with a well-placed figure in a landscape, while a rope leading into camera firmly places the viewer actually on the climb. But an 'angel's eye view' from a contrived viewpoint on a space-hung rope or a helicopter, immediately becomes an objective image.

With automation, a viable digital exposure is a given, so photography today is largely about composition – in its widest definition. Many people are born with the 'eye' and recognise instinctively a situation with potential, but are then unable to do justice to its mood and atmosphere in a photograph. Still, the eye can be trained, chiefly though constant analysis of one's work. Despite what the textbooks say, the only rule is that if it looks right, it is right, and that's where the eye comes in.

A picture is essentially an arrangement of shapes, tempered by texture and usually these days also by colour. It is the eye that must select the most appropriate combination of shapes from the scene ahead, and the choice of lens that best frames and records that selection. A pleasing arrangement might communicate tranquillity; a slightly different but perhaps jarring arrangement of the same shapes could suggest the opposite, and so on. It's a choice.

Silhouettes often work well, especially against sky or distant out of focus landscape. Climbing shots looking vertically upwards or downwards can be exciting but rarely work for obvious reasons to do with bottoms and backgrounds, while a vaguely horizontal view is usually fairly safe. A long enough exposure to catch the movement blur of a hand going for a hold is well worth trying.

The fine details in a picture are often overlooked. 'Think before you shoot,' should become second nature. A critical glance through the view finder should avoid such aberrations as horizons balanced on heads, trees protruding from ears, people standing on stalks or even ice axes looking like walking sticks. Ideally every part of a picture, not just the main subject, should impart useful information that helps define the context, the most obvious being clouds that will suggest the prevailing weather. Large areas of blank sky or dull foreground may devalue the main subject, unless, returning to the purpose of the picture, space is required for lettering.

Patience, anticipation and the ability to react swiftly are obvious requirements. Many years ago, when carrying a large sack, two Nikons and my usual gear, I found myself slogging up the Baltoro glacier with a foreign photographer carrying a medium-format camera and followed by a porter carrying his boxes, bags and tripod. The only way to make sense of this incredible avenue of unreal peaks was to provide scale, and luckily several dozen porters were also ascending the glacier. Though perfectly camouflaged against the endless mounds of rubble, every so often as they crested yet another moraine ridge they were momentarily silhouetted. And every time they did so I was waiting in a steady position with a telephoto lens already focused and able to snap off just one frame before they were gone. Then I'd move on to anticipate the next likely crest. Months later we were able to compare notes: I had a dozen sensational pictures of tiny men below towering peaks, he had just one picture of immaculate quality but a reference shot, begging the question, 'So what?'

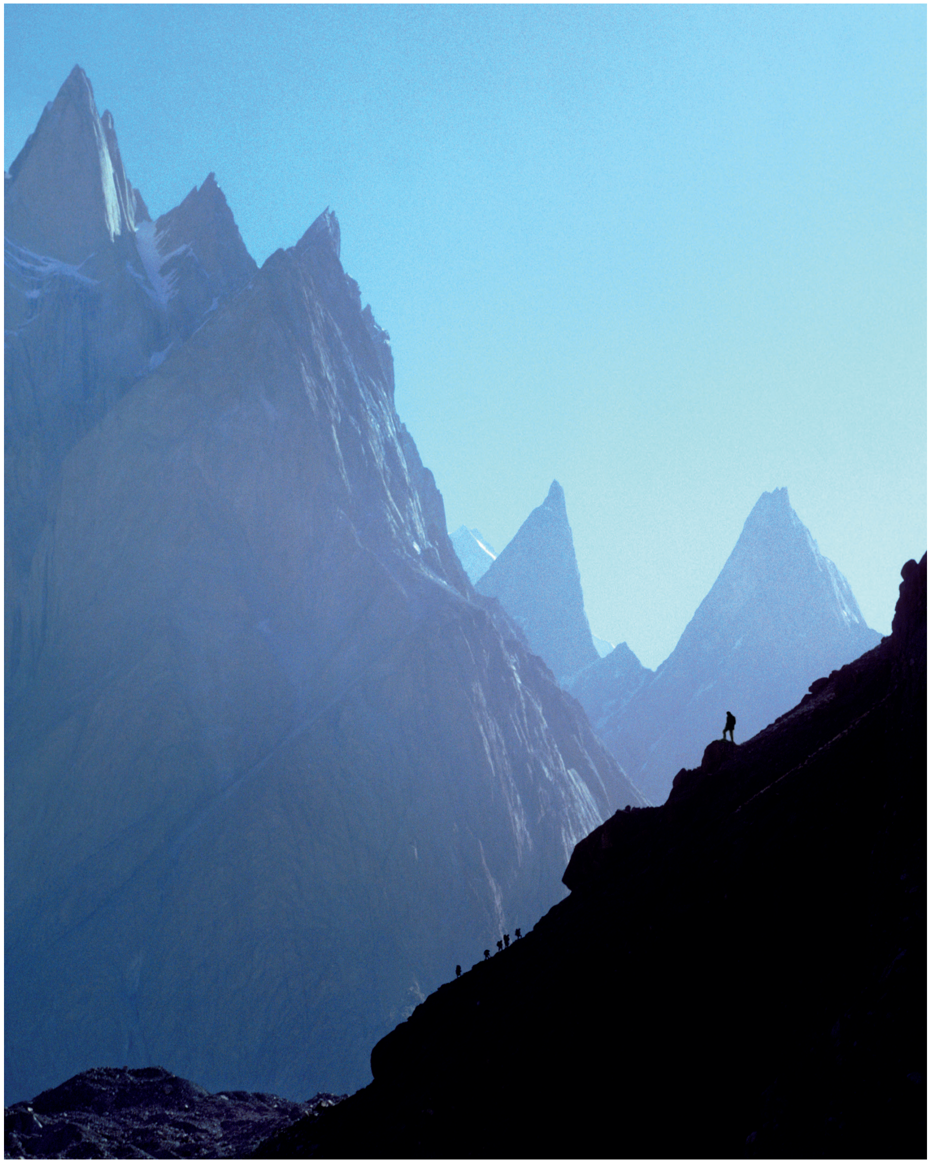
In a climbing situation anticipation can make all the difference. A little preparation, personal knowledge, a reconnaissance, studying the guidebook, can ensure the camera is in the ideal position to shoot the move that best captures the mood and ethos of the climb and the climber. A lot can depend on the model; one famous climber I knew made every move appear straightforward, another, equally brilliant, always looked like he was struggling. Style is crucial; a baboon-like fluidity is very photogenic.

Some of the best rock-climbing pictures are shot with the climber actually down-climbing a particular move, although that requires cooperative models. While the same principles apply, it is not easy to translate this into an alpine or big mountain setting where safety is more elusive and where one can only take advantage of situations as they present themselves, although with experience one can often anticipate a likely picture and be ready to shoot it as it occurs.

Clothing and colour choice are important. Forty odd years ago, before fashion hit mountain clothing, climbers frequently 'dissolved' into the rock, particularly when shooting in monochrome, so I would dress my climbers in white sweaters knitted specially for the task. Later, on a Himalayan expedition, we were generously given excellent wind-proof suits in an environmental dark green that proved virtually invisible against a black high-altitude sky. Though appealing, yellows can burn out against snow, while navy can lose all detail.

Carrying vulnerable photographic equipment is always a compromise, but cameras don't take pictures inside rucksacks. Early in my career, photographing while clambering around on such locations as the Forth Bridge and the Eigerwand, I found the regular photographer's gadget bag downright dangerous and so developed the first soft camera bags. I believe that weight should be taken on equipment properly designed for the job, such as a rucksack harness or a hip belt, thus on trek or snow plod I often hang the camera from a dog clip sewn to the rucksack harness where it's instantly usable, while a small pouch either side on a hip belt is far more comfortable than one large bag. Though the concept was copied commercially, vital features were missed. The best gear is homemade.

I can still look at a picture I shot 60 years ago and relive the moment. I'll know the place, the mood – even the smell. I'll recall exactly why I pressed the button. Will photography still be as evocative and still magic in another 170 years? I wonder.



A journey up the Baltoro glacier in the Karakoram offers continuous photographic potential, though demanding anticipation and careful selection to do justice to the awesome scenery. This picture, shot on the south bank of the glacier not far from the Liligo camping place, shows the Grand Cathedral with the Lobsang Spires beyond. Purposely lagging behind my friends, I'd noted where the vestigial trail crossed the skyline of the huge lateral moraine and waited, 200mm telephoto in hand. But it was luck that prompted my inadvertent model into a perfect pose as well as silhouetting the small group of porters, just visible on the steep moraine slopes beyond. *(John Cleare)*