
Breaking Glass



'Rhone Glacier with Mont de la Fourche', print after Philip James de Louthembourg, made by Jacques-Henri Juillerat, published by Christian v. Mechel, Basel. c1795-1800, etching with hand-colouring, 50cm x 64.7cm. (British Museum)

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‘A Tremendous Exertion for Ladies’

Images from the First Female Crossing
of the Col du Géant



Fig 1 'Geant. Upon the Snows', watercolour inscribed with ink, 22.6cm x 12.8cm, 1822. All illustrations by Elizabeth Campbell. Double-sided and backed with Fig 8 'Summit of the Col du Géant'. (All illustrations courtesy of Tony Astill.)

While every picture tells a story, there was unusual intrigue generated among Alpine collectors recently with the unexpected appearance of a handful of diminutive watercolour drawings. Dated 1822, one of these drawings, in a rather naive hand, depicts a group of five figures, including two ladies in long dresses, ribboned bonnets and nailed shoes, crossing the snows adjacent to the unmistakably crooked magnificence of that great shard of rock perched high on the Mont Blanc massif that is rather ignominiously named the Dent du Géant. This is the story behind that picture.

There has been much written about the early exploits of women in the Alps, although few women to write of who were active before the Golden Age of Alpine exploration in the mid 19th century. Of those few, the identity of two English ladies in particular, a Mrs and a Miss Campbell, had remained an enigma to mountaineering historians until now. However, the year 2022 not only marked the bicentenary of the most celebrated achievement of these two women, but was also the year in which their full identity was established via the extraordinary survival of Mrs Campbell's watercolour record.

On 19 August 1822 Mrs and Miss Campbell, already 'celebrated for their



Fig 2 'Le Jardin, Mont Blanc, Geant', watercolour and ink inscribed with title and date, 21.6cm x 28.5 cm, 1 August 1822.

intensive and courageous excursions among the Alps,¹ left their footprints in history when they became the first women to cross the Col du Géant, from 'Chamouni' to Courmayeur. Although offering the shortest passage from one valley to the other and therefore avoiding the 'tedious' alternatives, the rigours of the Glacier du Tacul had long deemed the route to the col 'impracticable', and even as 'despairing' by Bourrit.² Yet by 1788 de Saussure had made the spot memorable by his extraordinary 16-day residence there. Nevertheless, in 1822 it remained a hard and unfrequented passage rising to over 11,000ft at its crest. Even by 1843 Forbes still determined 'notwithstanding its immense height it would be frequented but for the dangers of the glacier on its northern side.'³

What had prompted their ambition can never be known but by coincidence on the very same day the two ladies set out for the col, the Englishman Frederick Clissold left the Hotel Union at Chamouni to commence his own momentous ascent of Mont Blanc. He had, in vain, he later noted, hoped to 'hail them' from above en route. However, news of the ladies' successful passage, and their 'determination to ascend to the summit of Mont Blanc, at the next season of their return to Chamouni'⁴ reached Clissold upon his return to the Priory. Indeed he reported 'that the two English ladies had passed

1. F Clissold, *Narrative of an Ascent to the Summit of Mont Blanc, August 18, 1822*, London, 1823, p8.

2. J Forbes, *Travels through the Alps of Savoy*, Edinburgh, 1843, pp216-8.

3. Forbes, *ibid*.

4. Clissold, *ibid*, p22.



Fig 3 'A nob of Ice on the same (Tacul) Glacier obliged to be crossed crevaces [sic] on all sides', 22.6cm x 12.8cm 1822. Double-sided backed with 'A passage on the glacier'.



Fig 4 'Bridge of less than a foot wide on the same [Tacul] Glacier. Steep banks of Ice & Crevaces on all sides', 22.5cm x 12cm, 1822. Double-sided backed with Fig 6 'The Cachat Impossible'.

the Col du Géant two or three hours before we reached the Petit Mulet, and that while we were near that rock they were descending at Courmayeur.⁵

Both were extraordinary feats which were, of course, celebrated in print: Clissold communicated his account, including a note of the two ladies' crossing, in a letter to his banker that was initially published in the *Bibliothèque universelle* and was in turn handed to the British press,⁶ and privately published the following year; the renowned Dr Paccard sent a note to the *Journal de Savoie* detailing Clissold's summit, and concluding 'On the same day two English ladies, Mrs and Miss Campbell crossed the Col de Giant [sic] having ascended the Buet the preceding day.' Paccard's article found a route to the British press⁷ and as far afield as India via the *Government Gazette*⁸; and, another contemporary traveller, Count Theobald Walsh, who 'happened to be in Chamouni on that very same day' confirmed that the two ladies had indeed trained for the feat, by first going to the Jardin and then the Buet.⁹

5. 'Ascent of Mont Blanc', *Bibliothèque Universelle* 30 Sept 1822, pub Perthshire Courier 15 Nov 1822, p4.
 6. *Ibid*, p4.
 7. 'Dr Paccard of Chamonix', *The Sun*, London, 24 September 1822, p1.
 8. 'Dr Paccard of Chamonix', *Government Gazette*, Madras, 22 May 1823, p6.
 9. C Engel, 'Early Lady Climbers', *Alpine Journal*, vol 54, 1943, pp51-9



Fig 5 'The Experiment. Position in which we remained a considerable time while the four Guides were seeking a passage in which they failed – but ourselves discovered an issue [?] which finally saved us', 22.5cm x 13cm, 1822. Double-sided backed with Fig 9 'Arrival at Night'.

Reading the report of another 'arduous and perilous' yet successful English ascent of Mont Blanc in 1825, by Capt Markham Sherwill and Dr Edmund Clark on 26 August, it is clear that the ladies' intention to attempt their own ascent of Mont Blanc 'the following year' continued as a subject of discussion amongst the British in Chamonix and in the British newspapers. The *Leeds Mercury* published a lengthy piece under the title 'Letters from the Continent'. This included a detailed report from one of the guides accompanying Clark and Sherwill, and 'subjoined' the note Dr Clark had made in the travellers' book in Chamonix, in which Clark's careful analysis of the pleasures, displeasures and final justification of his experience determined: 'The excursion would, I fear, be too painful for the female constitution; fourteen hours on the snow is more fatiguing than generally conceived.' With a sense of certain bewilderment the editor concluded: 'You will scarcely believe, after this account, that ladies are about to attempt the ascent of Mont Blanc. Yet it is true,' he continued, 'Mrs Campbell and her daughter who have already performed wonders in this way have announced their intention of ascending next year; both Capt. Sherwill and Dr Clark advise them to relinquish their design. ... This is a tremendous exertion for ladies.'¹⁰

Some years later, in 1862, Walsh picked up the theme of the constitution of the two ladies and neatly summarised their commendable achievements.

We still talk today about the courage and muscular strength displayed by two Scottish women, Mrs Campbell and her daughter, about 10 years ago. They, the first of their sex, crossed the Col du Géant to go to Courmayeur, followed

10. 'Letters from the Continent', *Leeds Mercury*, 28 Jan 1826, p4.



Fig 6 'The Cachat Impossible, on the Glacier du Tacul of the Col du Geant, August 19th 1822', 22.5cm x 12cm, 1822. Note the guide wearing two hats. Double-sided backed with Fig 4 'Bridge of less than a foot wide'.



Fig 7 'Passage on the Glacier du Tacul, ascending Col du Geant 19th Aug. 1822, 22.6 x 12.8 cms. Double sided backed with A nob of ice.

the whole length of the Mer de Glace to visit the Jardin, a rock covered with vegetation and flowers, which forms an oasis in the middle of these icy solitudes, they climbed to the top of Buet, the most difficult point to reach in this whole chain. These different routes last ten or twelve hours, and a great part of the way is silent in snow and ice, across crevices and along precipices.¹¹

Moving from contemporary commentary to that of a mountaineering historian of the mid 20th century, Claire-Éliane Engel included a precis of the Campbells' crossing of the Col du Géant in a piece she wrote for the *Alpine Journal* entitled 'Early Lady Climbers'. Their identity, and nationality, still a mystery she commenced, 'There are two Scottish ladies about whom I long to know more than I do now.' Quoting both Clissold's *Narrative* and Walsh's earlier 1823 *Notes en Suisse*, and elaborating on both the strategy and the stamina of the 'plucky and sensible' women Engel lamented: 'Nothing more is known about them.'¹²

11. T Walsh, *Voyage En Suisse et en Piedmont*, Paris, 1862, p377-8. Translation by author.
12. C Engel, 'Early Lady Climbers', *Alpine Journal*, vol 54, 1943, pp51-9.

Yet Mrs Campbell had kept a journal and a visual record of around a decade of European travel although the three Grand Tour sketch albums she created were known only to her family until sold at auction in 2020.¹³ The title page of one of these albums clarifies the extent of these travels and reveals her full name as the artist: 'Original sketches in the environs of Geneva, Chamouni, Savoy various parts of Switzerland, France and the Isle of Elba made during the years 1818, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27 by Elizabeth Campbell.' Of the nearly 500 sketches Elizabeth Campbell produced, just a handful are under discussion here, and of those it is only one annotated image that allows the only extant link with the artist and her daughter and their historic crossing of the Col du Géant.

Mrs Campbell was born Elizabeth Turner in the county of Yorkshire in 1783, the daughter of Yorkshire politician Sir Charles Turner of Kirkleatham and Mary Shuttleworth. Elizabeth's father died when she was young and following her mother's remarriage and early death she was raised by her stepfather the eminent Sir Thomas Gascoigne, eighth baronet and MP, on his estate at Parlington, near Leeds. There 'Elizabeth witnessed the practical application of Gascoigne's wide ranging enlightenment interests in history, agriculture and horticulture,'¹⁴ and accordingly developed her own extraordinary depth of character heavily influenced by this milieu. In 1801, aged 18, she married Lt Col William H Campbell and their only child Thomasina was born around 1804. Elizabeth was widowed after ten years of marriage.¹⁵ Now, as an intelligent, educated, plucky, artistic and informed wealthy widow, Elizabeth was able to emulate her stepfather's passion for travel and from 1818, as her watercolour sketchbook reveals, Elizabeth and her young daughter Thomasina embarked on a decade of annual European tours.

By 1828 Elizabeth had settled in Scotland, renting Kilravock Castle between Nairn and Inverness, where she became well established in the local community, managed her castle policies and home farm,¹⁶ entertained and indulged her other liberal interests which included a passion for archaeology, her formative years clearly still bearing effect on her achievements here in Britain, as they had in Europe. For it was her explorations here in Britain that have left a more visible trail; in the late 1820s, Elizabeth opened the tombs now known as the Clava Cairns, raising the question of whether she was Scotland's earliest female archaeologist.¹⁷ This allowed an alternative approach to researching Elizabeth's life that had, by strange twist of fate, remained a void for the years of her European travels. Agreeably, each line of research now neatly dovetails together.

In 1818 Elizabeth caught her first glimpse of the Mont Blanc range. She may have stopped en route to paint 'The Mole, Mont Blanc from the road

13. 'A collection of three Grand tour Sketch albums by Elizabeth Campbell circa 1818 to 1830 depicting various parts of Europe, Ireland and Britain', Moore Allen & Innocent, lot 314, sold 18 Jan 2020.

14. M Cross, 'The Campbells: Digging into the history of women in archaeology', Historic Environment Scotland website, 30 Sept 2022.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*

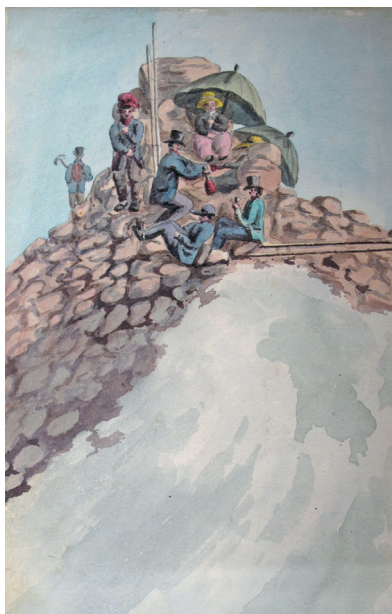


Fig 8 'Summit of the Col du Geant 19th August', 22.6cm x 12.8cm, 1822. Double-sided backed with *Fig 1* 'Géant. Upon the Snows'.



Fig 9 'Arrival at Night 19th August 1822', 22.5cm x 13cms, 1822. Note the addition of a small dog to the party on the descent to Entrèves. Double-sided backed with *Fig 5* 'The Experiment'.

to Coligny, 1818',¹⁸ to outline crisply the topography of a landscape that was yet to be explored. In contrast her sketchy 'L'Aiguille de Dru & end of the Mer de Glace 1818', cleverly stresses her diminutive viewpoint from very close to the glacier wall; Elizabeth allows the moraine, meltwater and seracs to entirely dominate the picture plane. In 1819 the view of the picturesque 'Bridge at St Martin over the Arve' was captured from the roadside. And in 1820 several views of the village of Chamonix were taken with the Arve and the Priory as her focus, with just a few foreground figures to aid perspective. Similarly on 4 August 1822, the year of their crossing, Elizabeth also painted the village from the chapel close by. Views of 'Montanvert', the 'Mer de Glace', and the 'Glacier des Bois' dated 1827 are Elizabeth's latest known drawings of the Chamonix valley which had clearly captivated her. Regrettably there is no known written account of these years of travel although Elizabeth did keep a journal to accompany her watercolours for her 1825 excursion to Sicily.¹⁹

There is a naivety and honesty to those small, annotated watercolours, painted back to back that depict the Campbell's actual crossing of the Col du Géant. They reveal the real dangers the party was forced to overcome.

18. Annotated on reverse.

19. Mrs Campbell's travel journal and watercolours illustrating her journey through Sicily in 1825 are in the possession of a London gallery.

The ladies prepared well for the arduous traverse. Their excursion to the Jardin took place on 1 August that year. Elizabeth's watercolour 'Le Jardin, Mont Blanc, Geant 1st August 1822' (Fig 2) skilfully summarises the ladies' ambition; it is a record of reconnoitre. Clearly visible to the two women for the first time is the objective and the route and it is possible Elizabeth first forged both her col and summit ambitions from this viewpoint. She depicts her daughter and the guides surveying the vista from the shelter of the Jardin, following their extensive glacier walk. No less taxing was their ascent of the Buet on 17 August, which was considered a most difficult and tedious climb at the time,²⁰ with steep scree slopes and a glacier walk to the snow-covered summit. Their reward was the stunning view directly across the valley toward the shapely dome and flowing glaciers of Mont Blanc,²¹ which may well have further prompted their goals.

The two ladies would have taken the same opportunity of settled weather as Clissold, who had 'remained ten days in expectation of'²² it. Accordingly, so his narrative reports, 'On Sunday 18 August Mrs and Miss Campbell ... started at mid-day with eight guides from the Priory at Chamouni',²³ though Elizabeth's drawings reveal a smaller party. The guides were equipped with standard though scant equipment for glacier excursions at the time: packs, a pikestaff to fix into the ice and ropes. Whilst the whole party wore shoes armed with sharp-headed nails,²⁴ the cumbersome and inadequate attire of the ladies is clear (Fig 3). Clissold had been made aware of the ignorance of their guides leading him to comment, 'These two ladies have shown how female intrepidity may finally surmount danger even when the experience of guides may fail.'²⁵ It seems that the guides' inability to handle the ropes had caused the ladies more difficulties than he had faced on the mountain. Indeed, using Forbes' account of his reverse crossing of the col 20 years later²⁶ it is possible to grasp the ladies situation, and Elizabeth's focus in her sketches on the challenge of forging a route on the Tacul glacier. And, although Engel considered 'the seracs were probably easier to cross ... as the glacier was much higher'²⁷ at that time, the ladies' great difficulty is well conveyed in the drawings (Figs 4-7). Forbes describes the precipitous situation, the 'wilds of ice' encountered in which the most 'terrific chasms and rents are hidden like a ditch in a *ha-ha* fence ... a chaos of impassable fissures ... a labyrinth,' and most telling of all is his short sentence, 'The spectacle gave us pause,'²⁸ which aligns so well with Elizabeth's annotation in Fig 5 'The experiment position', bringing to mind Walsh's previously quoted comment.

After successfully navigating the perilous maze of seracs the party would have endured a cold and uncomfortable bivouac 'passing the night at the

20. Walsh, *ibid*.

21. C Engel, *Mountaineering in The Alps, An Historical Survey*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1971), pp29-30.

22. 'Ascent of Mont Blanc', *Bibliothèque Universelle*, *ibid*.

23. Clissold, *ibid*, p8.

24. 'Letters from the Continent', *Leeds Mercury*, 28 Jan 1826, p.4.

25. Clissold, *ibid* p22.

26. J Forbes, *Travels through the Alps of Savoy*, Edinburgh, 1843, pp216-243.

27. C Engel, 'Early Lady Climbers', *Alpine Journal*, vol 54, 1943, pp51-9.

28. Forbes, *ibid*, p237.

foot of the rocks of Tacul',²⁹ 'sleeping on the snow at the elevation of over eight thousand feet above Chamouni',³⁰ after which 'easier but long slopes of snow'³¹ lay ahead to the col at 11,140ft (Fig 1).

This was clearly a place for both celebration and shelter. In her record of their achievement 'The summit of the Col du Géant 19th August' Elizabeth depicts the party sharing wine whilst she and Thomasina use umbrellas against the wind (Fig 8). It must be hoped that Elizabeth and Thomasina took a moment during their rest at the col to absorb the ethereal beauty of this impressive site. Engel writes of it as 'a place of vision ... a world of its own, a large snowy plateau encircled far and near by the most impressive rock pinnacles of the Mont Blanc range.'³² It had captivated de Saussure, who had felt elated, and written ecstatic descriptions of the place to his wife.³³ Although de Saussure's hut had long been destroyed³⁴ at the time Forbes passed through he noted 'a board and a considerable quantity of straw ... yet remained there, preserved for half a century. There was also an empty bottle, entire.' This was possibly 'a relic of another illustrious guest M Elie de Beaumont, the last traveller but one who, seven years before, had passed the wild spot.' Forbes also recalled his admiration of the scene, how his 'wide glance' of the southern panorama 'filled my mind with a pleasing confusion of images of grandeur and beauty' and how from there he considered 'the summit of Mont Blanc as perfectly distinct ... close at hand although still 4600 feet above the spectator,'³⁵ an opinion closely shared by a later observer who reflected that from the col 'Mont Blanc looked so near that one felt as if it would not add much to include him in a day's work.'³⁶ Perhaps it was also this, the foreshortened proximity of the summit that further inspired the women's ambition to scale the mountain, although that was not to be. Not forsaking the perfection of the view from the col, 'from the gap at the foot of the wild ridge crowned by'³⁷ what Forbes described as 'the great tooth like form of the Aiguille de Géant', the descent, 'a long uniform slope of nearly 8000 feet',³⁸ still lay ahead. The ladies arrived at Entrèves in darkness (Fig 9).

There remains much more to tell of these two English ladies. And, whilst the historic significance of their crossing of the Col du Géant has not gone completely unrecognised through the years, Mrs Campbell's watercolour record of it certainly remained unknown, lost in time. Now, in this bicentennial year, via sight of just one small watercolour drawing, Elizabeth and Thomasina Campbell's full identity has been established and these two resolute English ladies can rightfully occupy a slightly wider niche in history.

29. 'Ascent of Mont Blanc', *Bibliothèque Universelle*, *ibid*.

30. 'Letters from the Continent', *Leeds Mercury*, *ibid*.

31. C Parker, 'Passages in 1860, Without Guides, of the Strahlegg, Schwarzerz, Weissthor, Col d'Hérens and Col du Géant', *The Alpine Journal*, vol 30, London, 1916), p42.

32. C Engel, *They Came to the Hills*, London, 1952, p60.

33. Engel, *Mountaineering in the Alps*, *ibid*, p58.

34. Engel, 'Early Lady Climbers', *ibid*.

35. Forbes, *ibid*, pp225, 228 and 235.

36. Parker, *ibid*.

37. Engel, *Mountaineering in the Alps*, *ibid*.

38. Forbes, *ibid*, p.225.