

One hundred years ago

(with extracts from the *Alpine Journal*)

C. A. Russell

'Mr Whymper, who was much applauded on rising, delivered a most interesting address, which was listened to throughout with marked attention. The lecture was illustrated by sketch maps, photographs, and plans. At its conclusion, the Prince of Wales, in a few short and graceful phrases, moved a vote of thanks to Mr Whymper for his interesting and entertaining lecture'.

The General Meeting of the Alpine Club held in the Theatre of the Royal Institution on 1 February 1881 was an event of some consequence. A very large audience of members of the Club and their friends, numbering more than 900, assembled to hear Edward Whymper deliver a lecture on his expedition of the previous year to the Andes, with particular reference to the ascents of Chimborazo and Cotopaxi. Other distinguished guests included the Presidents of the Royal Geological and Zoological Societies, whose presence acknowledged the considerable value of the research carried out during the expedition.

Although a number of the high Alpine peaks had been climbed in winter during the previous few years very few, if any, ascents had been made in early Spring¹. However on 17 March Emil Walker and Herr Nägeli, with Melchior Anderegg and Hans and Melchior von Bergen, succeeded in reaching the summit of the Wetterhorn. The party was able to witness the sunrise but the cold was intense and they were glad to return to the valley later in the day.

During the whole of June and much of July the weather in all regions of the Alps was exceptionally fine, with perfect snow conditions. W. A. B. Coolidge, who arrived in the Dauphiné early in the season was able to complete an extensive tour of the district. On 10 July, with Christian Almer and his son Christian, Coolidge made the first ascent of Le Fivre, the sharp pinnacle between the Barre des Écrins and Pic Coolidge: 'Starting from La Bélarde, they gained by the usual route a point within a few steps of the Col des Avalanches, to the south of the Écrins. In 25 min, by means of very rotten rocks, they gained the south slope of the western ridge of this peak. The ascent was made thence mainly by the crest of this western ridge, occasionally taking to the north face, the rocks being rotten, except near the top, where they were exceedingly steep. The great feature of the view is the splendid south face of the Écrins.'

On the following day the same party returned to the Col des Avalanches and went on to complete the second ascent of the S face of the Écrins. As the rocks near the summit were covered in ice it was decided to descend by the usual route. In the event a good part of the night was spent 'in scrambling down the moraines of the Bonnapierre glacier—a fact which will appeal vividly to those who have the doubtful privilege of being personally acquainted with that abandoned spot'. Coolidge added that the 2 points which consoled him for this very exhausting expedition were 'the marvellous view we had from the top and the fact that we were the first to "traverse" the Écrins, combining the two sides in a single expedition'.

After resting for nearly a fortnight, a period of intense heat, the party moved across the frontier into Italy where Coolidge was able to put a new idea to the test. 'When drawing out my plan for 1881, the Viso was made one of its chief features, especially



97 *Monte Viso from the NE (Photo: R. L. G. Irving)*

as a wild idea had seized me that possibly it might not be impracticable to ascend the Viso direct by the north-eastern face above the sources of the Po'.

Starting from the Piano del Re above Crissolo on 28 July the party succeeded in forcing a route up the steep NE face of Monte Viso to the summit. Ascending by means of a couloir and a rocky gully they reached 'the little glacier seen in all views

from this side. They mounted the glacier for a few steps, and then took to the rocks of the east face, which were at first excellent, but gradually became steeper and steeper. The great couloir which descends from near the summit of the Viso to the little glacier being composed of hard ice, the party finally ascended close to the rocks on the right bank. The ice in the upper part of the couloir was as bad as below, though not quite as steep. The ascent was continued, when a great height had been attained, by a gully in the rocks to the left which led directly towards the summit'. After completing the ascent the party basked in the sun and watched the shadow of the great peak creeping over the Italian plains. 'It was with difficulty, so warm and pleasant was it, that we could realize that we were at so great a height, and it was only stern necessity which forced us to commence the descent'.

Coolidge, who had made the second ascent of the NW face of the Viso nearly 2 years earlier, was justifiably proud of this new route to the summit.

By the middle of July many other parties had arrived to take advantage of the excellent conditions, including Charles and Lawrence Pilkington and Frederick Gardiner. During the following 4 weeks this party added to their previous successes by climbing without guides a number of first class peaks in the Bernese Oberland and the Pennine Alps, including the Dammastock, the Wetterhorn and the Matterhorn. In addition this party made the first guideless ascent of the Finsteraarhorn and reached the summit of the Jungfrau from the Guggi hut, a snow and ice route which is still regarded as fairly difficult.

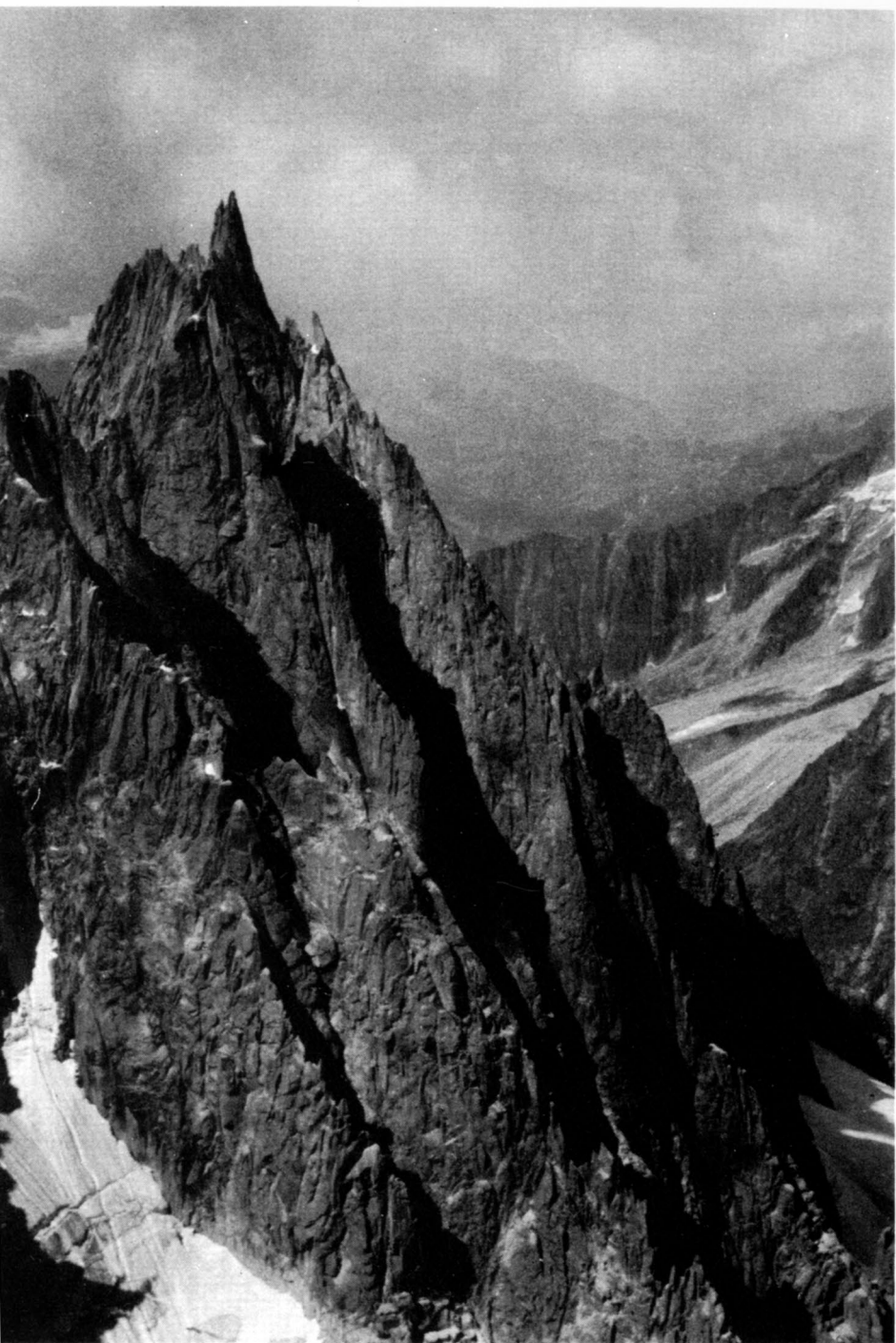
Also in the Oberland a serious attempt to climb the NE, or Mittellegi, ridge of the Eiger was made by J. Oakley Maund and J. Baumann, with Johann Jaun, Andreas Maurer and Emile Rey. Starting from Grindelwald, they worked their way for a considerable distance along the ridge on 31 July as far as the foot of the big step which is now climbed with the aid of a fixed rope.

In the Graian Alps on 3 August George Yeld and G. P. Baker, with Ulrich Almer and Johann Jossi, made the first ascent of the E ridge of Mont Herbetet. On 6 August the same party climbed the Grivola by way of the long and difficult W ridge, the first time that the summit had been reached from this direction.

Apart from occasional storms the fine weather continued in most Alpine regions, including the Mont Blanc range, where on 30 July A. F. Mummery, with Alexander Burgener, made the first ascent of the SW, or Charpoua face of the Aiguille Verte. The climb was both difficult and dangerous and Burgener broke his axe while endeavouring to avoid one of the many stones which hurtled down the face. Mummery later wrote² that at one point he was glad to take off the 2 knapsacks he had been carrying, and, 'as an excuse for a halt, we both pretended to eat. Possibly the extraordinary appetite climbers appear to exhibit on mountains is in no small degree due to their desire for the halt involved. Food on the higher ridges and "the view" on the lower slopes appear to be much enjoyed by individuals short in wind and flabby in muscle'.

The Mummery route, which goes more or less directly up the face, is very exposed to stonefall and is rarely climbed today.

Only a few days after this success Mummery, with Burgener and Benedikt Venetz, completed the principal climb of the season, the first ascent of the Aiguille du Grépon. From observations made from the nearby Aiguille des Grands Charmoz during the previous year Mummery had decided that the E face overlooking the Mer de Glace offered better prospects than the W face above the Nantillons glacier. Accordingly, on 1 August the party arrived at the foot of the E face only to find that the climbing was considerably more difficult than Mummery had expected. Later in the day 'it



98 *Aiguille du Grépon (This and next photo: C. D. Milner)*

was obvious that, although we had been going eight hours, we had hardly begun the real climb, and we halted with one consent to see whether the attempt was worth further effort. The col between the Grépon and Charmoz appeared accessible, and it also looked as if a way might be forced to the gap between the summit and the tower which is now known as the Pic Balfour. Each of these points, however, was, we knew, more easily reached from the Nantillons glacier. Our object had been to force an ascent straight up the face, and thus avoid the difficulties of the ridge. This, we now saw was nearly, if not quite, out of the question. Burgener expressed his willingness to go on, but added that it would, of necessity, involve our sleeping on the rocks. The provisions were too scanty for this to be desirable, and after an hour's halt public opinion clearly favoured a descent'.

Had the party decided to bivouac they might well have completed the climb up the E face. In the event 30 years were to elapse before the summit was reached from this side.

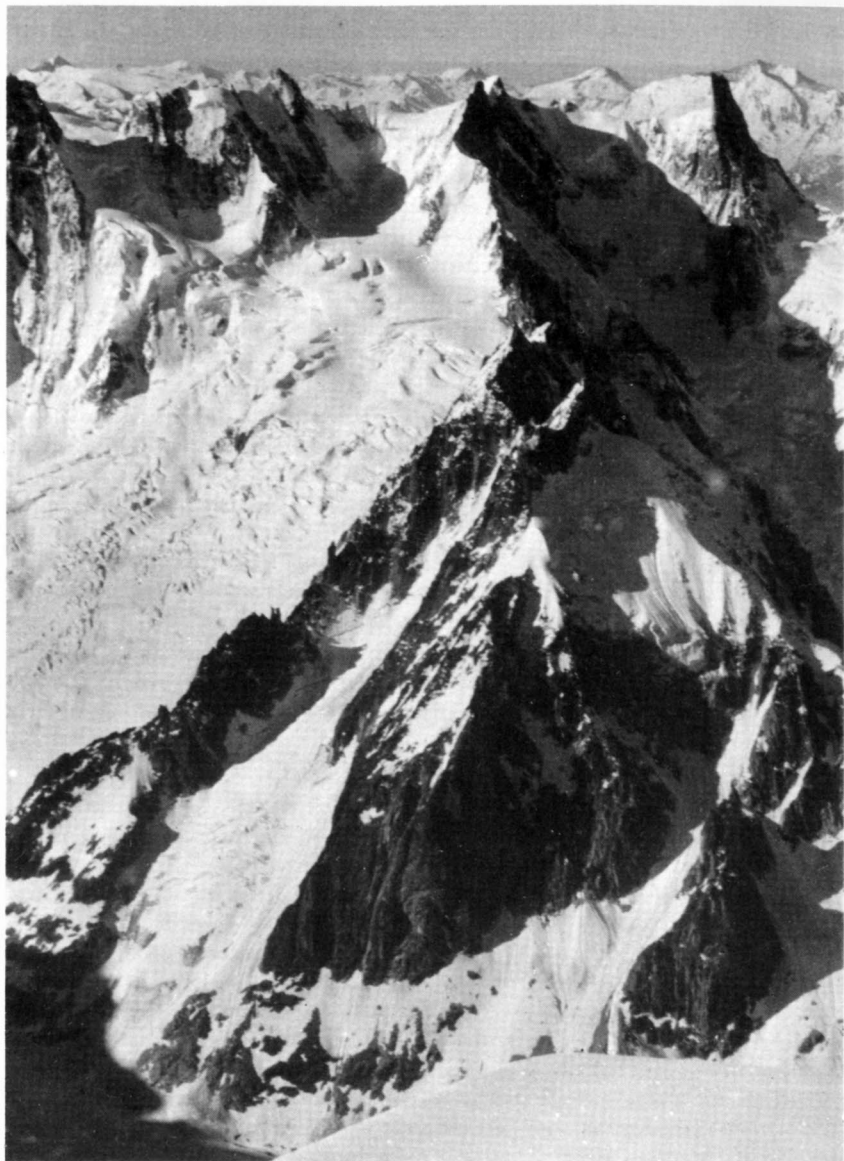
On 3 August the party attacked the peak from the Nantillons side and were encouraged to find that the climbing was easier than expected. After a rapid ascent they arrived at the foot of the crack just below the main ridge which is now known as the Mummery Crack. 'So soon as Burgener had brought round the rope and knapsack, Venetz tied up and set to work. At one or two places progress was very difficult, the crack being in part too wide to afford any hold, and forcing the climber on to the face of the slab. I subsequently found that at the worst point my longer reach enabled me to get hold of a small protuberance with one finger, but how Venetz, whose reach is certainly a foot less than mine, managed to get up has never been satisfactorily explained. At the next stage the crack narrows, and a stone has conveniently jammed itself exactly where it is wanted: beyond, the right-hand side of the crack gets broken, and it is a matter of comparative ease to pull oneself on to the top'.

Having overcome this difficulty the party continued up the ridge to the N summit. 'Stones were hauled up by Venetz in considerable quantities, and the construction of a stone man—or, having regard to its age and size, I ought, perhaps, to say a stone baby—was undertaken. A large red handkerchief was then produced, and the baby was decorously draped in this becoming and festive attire'.

Despite this achievement Mummery suspected, correctly, that a tower further along the ridge might be higher.³ 'That night my dreams were troubled by visions of a great square tower—the great square tower that at the other end of the summit ridge had thrust its shoulders above the snows of the Col du Géant, and though the men had stoutly maintained that our peak was the highest, I felt that the delights of an untroubled mind and a conscience void of offence must be forever abandoned if up that tower I did not go'.

To dispel any doubts Mummery and the 2 guides set out once more on 5 August, returned to the N summit by way of the crack and continued to the foot of the other tower. 'It was certainly one of the most forbidding rocks I have ever set eyes on. Unlike the rest of the peak, it was smooth to the touch, and its square-cut edges offered no hold or grip of any sort. True, the block was fractured from top to bottom, but the crack, four or five inches wide, had edges as smooth and true as a mason would have hewn them, and had not one of those irregular and convenient backs not infrequently possessed by such clefts. Even the dangerous help of a semi-loose stone, wedged with doubtful security, between the opposing walls, was lacking. Added to all this a great rock overhung the top, and would obviously require a powerful effort just when the climber was more exhausted'.

As in the case of the other crack Venetz, one of the best guides of the period, led the way and Mummery wrote that 'inch by inch he forced his way, gasping for breath, and his hand wandering over the smooth rock in those vague searches for non-existent holds which it is positively painful to witness. Burgener and I watched him with intense anxiety, and it was with no slight feeling of relief that we saw the fingers of one hand reach the firm hold offered by the square-cut top. A few moments' rest, and he made his way over the projecting rock, whilst Burgener and I yelled ourselves hoarse'.



99 *Peaks of the Mont Blanc group including the Dome de Rochefort above the left hand glacier*

The ascent of the Grépon, one of the most popular of the Chamonix Aiguilles, was a fine achievement, even for such an exceptional party. Of all his expeditions it is probably this climb for which Mummery is best remembered.

In the same region, on 12 August, another first ascent was recorded when James Eccles, with Michel and Alphonse Payot, reached the summit of the unclimbed Dôme de Rochefort, the highest point on the Rochefort ridge.

Further along the chain, on the E face of Monte Rosa, a major accident occurred on 8 August when Damiano Marinelli and his guides were killed during an attempt to make the third ascent of the couloir which now bears his name. The weather was hot and close late in the afternoon when the party consisting of Marinelli, the guides Ferdinand Imseng¹ and Battista Pedranzini and a porter, unwisely decided to cross the couloir and reach a higher bivouac on the Imsengrücken rocks instead of bivouacking further down. The party, which was unroped, had just started to climb the rocks when a huge avalanche of snow, ice and broken rocks swept Marinelli and the 2 guides to their deaths. Only the porter, who had stopped to drink water and was consequently some distance behind, survived. This accident, and subsequent ones in the vicinity, serve as a reminder that it is imperative to climb this very dangerous and exposed route only during the early hours of the morning and under clear and cold conditions.

In the Dauphiné, on 25 August, despite a general deterioration in the weather, W. E. Gabbett and W. M. Baker, with Aloys Pollinger and J. M. Lochmatter, made the first ascent of the SE face of the Râteau. This face is both steep and dangerous and is not often climbed today. Further E, in the Dolomites, the unclimbed Kleine Zinne, the E summit of the Drei Zinnen (Tre Cime di Lavaredo) was ascended by M. and J. Innerkofler. Also in the Dolomites, on 23 August, Demeter Diamantidi, with Luigi Cesaletti and B. Mariano, made the first ascent of the NE and highest peak of the Sasso di Mur.

It seems fitting that the conclusion to this account of the events of 100 years ago should be provided by Mummery, that great mountaineer whose career did so much to advance the standards of climbing in the Alps and elsewhere.

‘The art of mountaineering consists of being able to climb easily and securely, in being able to relate one’s skill to the difficulties of the slopes above and around, and it may, to some extent, be practised and enjoyed, consistently with reasonable safety and self respect, by every man, no matter how slight his natural aptitude and training may be. It is merely necessary that he should recognize the limits so imposed.

High proficiency in the sport is only attainable when a natural aptitude is combined with long years of practice, and not without some, perhaps much, danger to life and limb. Happily, the faithful climber usually acquires his skill at an age when the responsibilities of life have not yet laid firm hold upon him, and when he may fairly claim some latitude in matters of this sort. On the other hand he gains a knowledge of himself, a love of all that is most beautiful in nature, and an outlet such as no other sport affords for the stirring energies of youth; gains for which no price is, perhaps, too high. It is true the great ridges sometimes demand their sacrifice, but the mountaineer would hardly forego his worship though he knew himself to be the destined victim. But happily to most of us the great brown slabs bending over into immeasurable space, the lines and curves of the wind-moulded cornice, the delicate undulations of the fissured snow, are old and trusted friends, ever luring us to health and fun and laughter, and enabling us to bid a sturdy defiance to all the ills that time and life oppose.’

Notes

- 1) Although D. W. Freshfield had reached the summit of the Vignemale in the Pyrenees on 25 April 1874.
- 2) In his book *My Climbs in the Alps and Caucasus*
- 3) The heights of the S and N summits are today recorded as 3482m and 3478m respectively.
- 4) The leading guide on the first ascent in July 1872.

Regional Notes 1980

Tom Connor

As far as is known, all these notes refer to events which took place in 1979, unless otherwise stated.

ALPS AND EUROPE

The pattern of activity in the Alps has been much as in recent years, solo ascents and winter climbs producing some element of novelty, with the occasional new route being completed usually on faces already having several well established lines. Many of these climbs are detailed in *Mountain* and elsewhere; we just pick out some of the highlights below.

Jean-Marc Boivin soloed the N face of the Matterhorn on 5 August in 4hr and 10min, a record for the face. Not content with this, he then used a hang glider to make the fastest safe descent of the mountain. A few days previously, he had skied the E face, starting just below the head wall. Patrick Edlinger was very active in the Massif d'Oisan, soloing the N face/E col route and the central ice slope/N face of Pelvoux and the Sombardier Gully on the N face of Ailefroide. Earlier in the year, Edlinger and Patrick Berhault made a very fast winter climb of the Marmier/Mercadié route on the NW face of Ailefroide. The return trip to the Refuge Cézanne took 23hr and no bivouac gear was carried. The American solo climber Charlie Foster was active in 1979 completing an impressive list of routes: Swiss route Les Courtes; N face Aiguille du Plan; N face Grands Charmoz; N face Les Droites; Nant Blanc Aiguille Verte; Nant Blanc Pic Sans Nom. The 19 year old Seattle climber Steve Sustadt soloed the N face of Les Droites in 6½hr. Another climber specializing in solo ascents is the Italian Franco Perlotto who had 27 solo ascents in the Dolomites to his credit, beginning with the first winter ascent of the direct route on Cima Piccola as long ago as 1975. He has made first solo ascents in other regions also, eg Mont Blanc, Norway (Trollryggen) and the Hoggar (N face of Mont Adriane).

Some very fast winter climbs have been completed. On Les Droites, Berhault and Phillippe Martinez made the second winter ascent of the Cornuau/Davaille route, leaving the Argentière hut at 1am and reaching the summit at noon. They took one light sack between them and no ice pitons, preferring to belay with their iceaxes. The first winter solo of the Lagarde couloir on Les Droites was made by Bernard Muller in 6hr. He also climbed the Bonatti/Zappelli route on the Grand Pilier d'Angle in 4½hr. In the Pyrenees, 3 British climbers, Ray Harris, Pete Shone and Nigel Perry visited the Cirque de Gavarnie in winter and completed 3 ascents of steep ice routes. All gave excellent sustained climbing mainly on water ice (Scottish gradeV); the Diedre des Mystiques was particularly notable for its 3 final pitches and the ascent (probably the second) was completed in 5½hr. In the Dolomites, Czech climbers were active in winter. A party of 4 including a 20 year old girl climber made the first winter ascent of the Via degli Amici/Messner on the Civetta. Porvaznik and Valovic made the first climb of a new route on the NW face of Piccola Civetta in March, taking 7 days; Fulka and Smid made the first winter ascent of the Via dei Fodom on the Punta Civetta in 5 days. Other Czech parties made first winter ascents on Torre Alleghe and Monte Agner.

During the summer season of 1979, Polish women climbers made a number of first ascents by all female parties: E face Aiguille du Moine (Halina Kaniut and Anna Buraczewska); Bonatti route E face Grand Capucin (Irena Kesa and Wanda Rutkiewicz in 16hr); Cordier Pillar W face Grands Charmoz (Ewa Pankiewicz and Agnieszka Smolska); Migot Pillar N face Chardonnet (Kesa and Rutkiewicz).