

The Matterhorn Image

Edward Pyatt

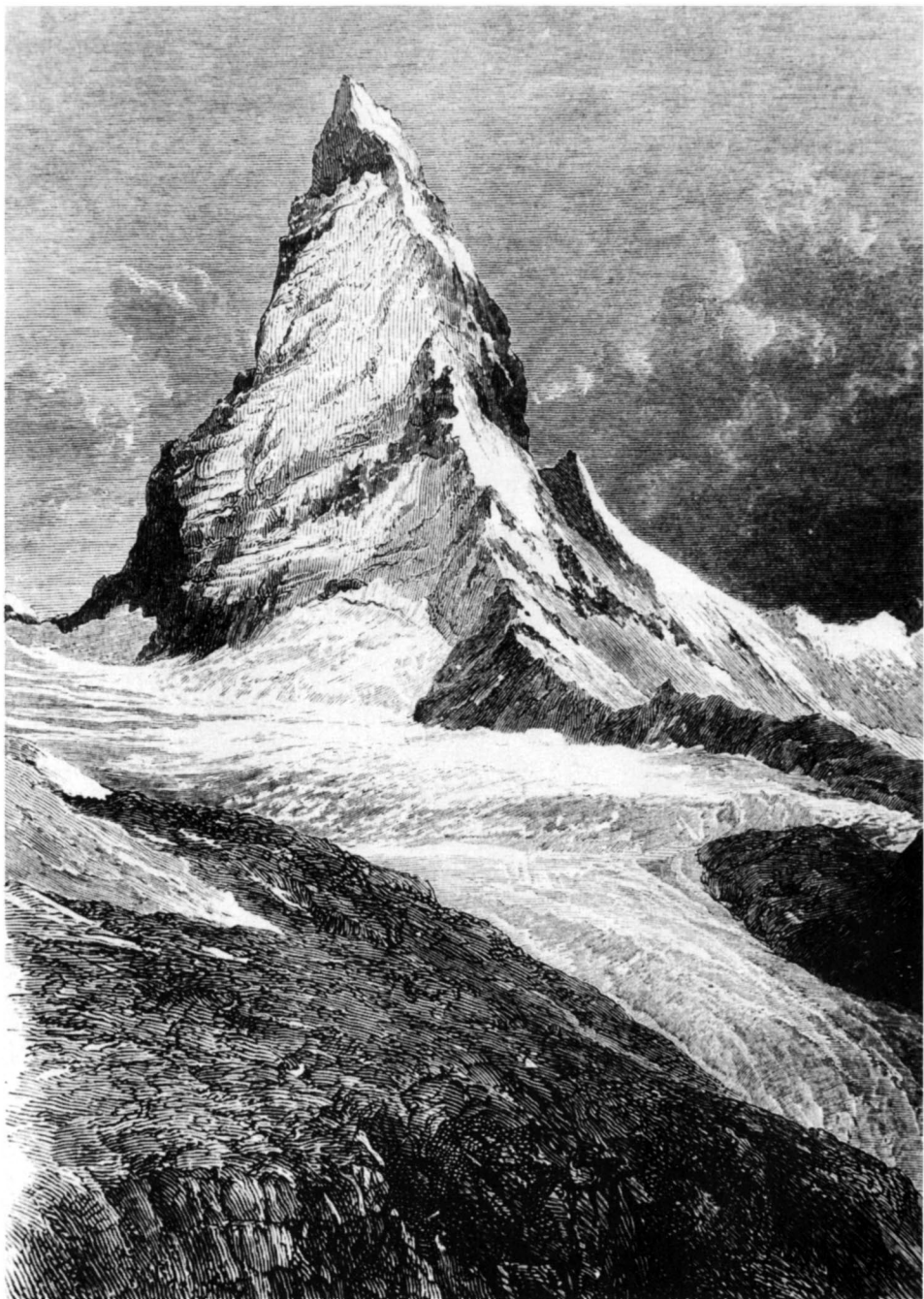
Photographs 41 — 46

The Matterhorn viewed from the Swiss side exhibits what has come to be regarded as the ideal mountain form. The Swiss ridge down centre and the north and east faces on either hand terminating in the Zmutt and Furggen Ridges are seen to form a very steep-sided square pyramid coming to a point at the top. The viewpoint is important for we know that the Italian side is not so tidy and that as soon as the Italian ridge comes into view, the clean lines are blurred, even though the outline is still impressive. In the best view the sensation is heightened by the isolation of the peak, which, standing quite alone, rears high above the valleys and the immediately surrounding mountains. The impression therefore combines the shape and the isolation. It is 4477m high and was first climbed in 1865. Nearby beyond the St Theodule Pass the Kleine Matterhorn mimics the shape but not the height and the difficulty.

The Matterhorn is without doubt the best known Swiss peak and, apart from Mount Blanc, the best known Alpine peak. Its outline, familiar to a wide range of people well beyond the circle of specialist mountaineers, is extensively used on posters advertising Switzerland, as well as for the ideal abstract mountain on cards and calendars. With all this tremendous emphasis it is not surprising to find that mountains elsewhere, of similar steep, clean, pyramidal lines and similarly isolated, should be likened to it and dubbed the 'Matterhorn' of their particular country, district or range. There is perhaps one other consideration involved. The Matterhorn long enjoyed a reputation for inaccessibility, such that many mountaineers would not even attempt it. A mountain might earn its sobriquet on the grounds that it looked difficult or impossible to climb, a category into which many columnar-type mountains might also fall. The love of mountains and of climbing mountains for sport originated in the Alps and spread therefrom throughout the world; with them spread the principles and the particulars of mountain nomenclature.

We can start with boulders, proceed to hills and so on and on upward to mountains, to the original in the Swiss Alps and finally to others elsewhere even higher. It has to be borne in mind that the characteristic shape needs only to be presented from one viewpoint. We have seen that the Matterhorn itself earns its reputation when viewed from Zermatt or some of the surrounding peaks and glaciers. Other mountains, cocked-hat shape, even steep-sided lengthy ridges, have pyramidal outlines when viewed end-on, but appear entirely different from the side. In fact geologically this type of structure is much more likely than a square or triangular pyramidal form.

There are untold numbers of Matterhorn Boulders. Any sharply pointed piece of rock, however small, could earn itself the name when submerged in the flood of local rock climbing exploration, the distinctive shape recalling the original to the climber's mind. One at High Rocks, near Tunbridge Wells in Kent, is a mere four



41 *The Matterhorn, from Hours of Exercise in the Alps, Tyndall, 2nd Edition, Longmans, 1891*

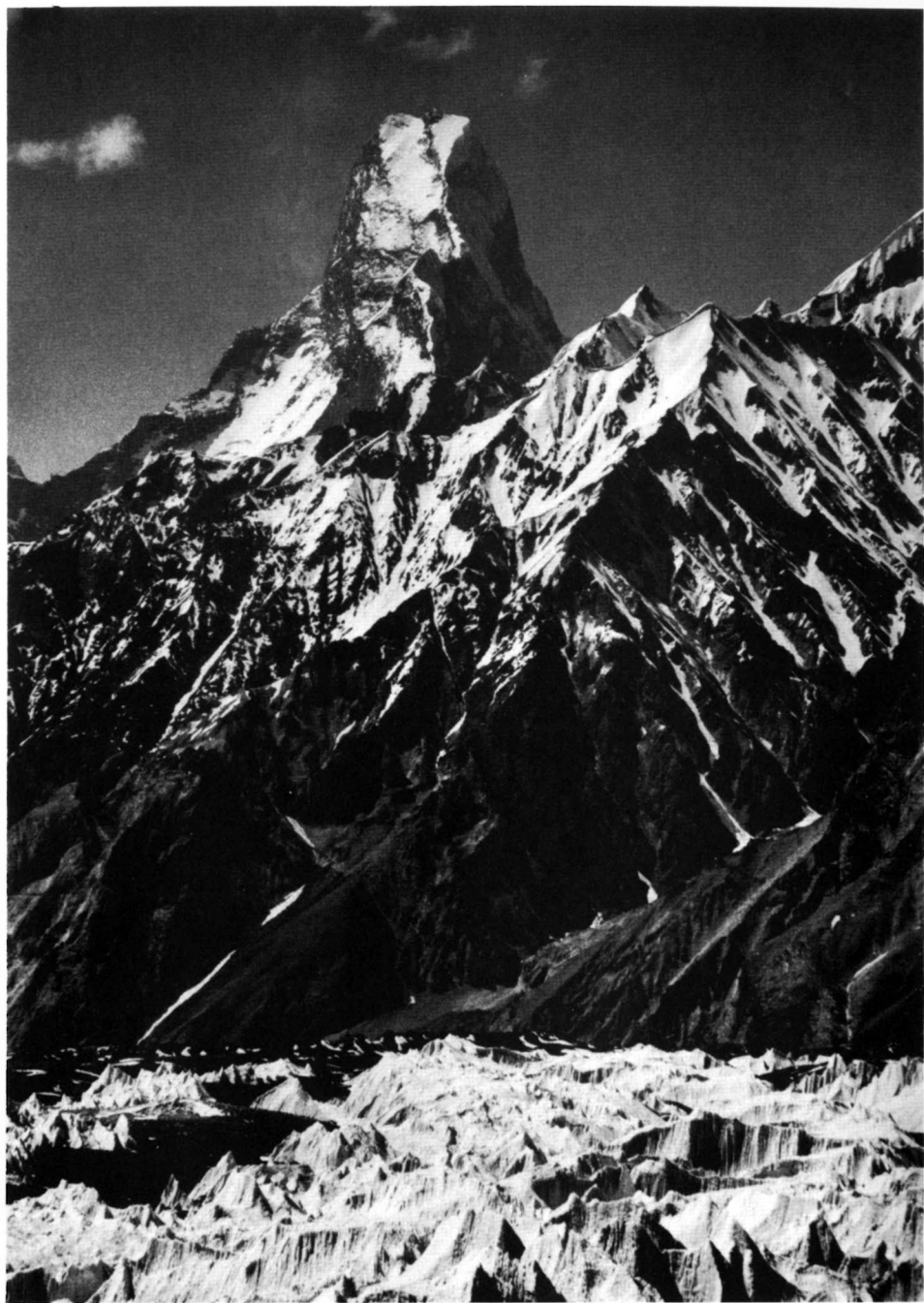


Photo: John Cleare

metres high; in one corner it has a fierce overhang called Zmutt. Sometimes pinnacles of striking form get left behind in quarries, the remains of vertical strata of unwanted rock. Such a one was the Taffs Well Matterhorn near Cardiff, named and climbed at the turn of the century, now submerged in quarry debris. There is at least one 'Matterhorn' on griststone.

The British Isles have three 'Matterhorns'. The lowest is Roseberry Topping in the North York Moors National Park — the so-called 'Matterhorn of Cleveland'. It reaches a modest 322m and is of course easily and quickly climbed. The Welsh image, Cnicht (629m), in the Snowdonia National Park, is a long cocked-hat type mountain, which has to be viewed from the Beddgelert-Penrhyndeudraeth road for the form to be appreciated. The corresponding hill in Scotland is Suilven (731m) in the North-West Highlands by Lochinver. It too is a long ridge which must be viewed end-wise. The sides are climbable, the traverse interesting, while the west end provides a few climbing problems. The small mountains hereabouts rise above a barren moorland with numerous small lochs — a unique landscape of isolated rock peaks of varied shape and form.

Not surprisingly European 'Matterhorns' are not plentiful, too close as they are to the original. Corsica has one in Paglia Orba (2525m) in the Cinto Group, but this was named for inaccessibility rather than shape or isolation. It is a rock peak which was not climbed until 1909. No mountain in mainland France has yet attracted the title, though the Rocher St Julien viewed end-on from near Buis les Baronnies would certainly deserve to be called the 'Matterhorn of Provence'. The very striking outline of Mont Aiguille in the Vercors is a rock wedge, a column rather than a pyramid. Zimba (2643m) in the Vorarlberg is described as the 'Matterhorn of Montafon'. Two mountains contend for the title 'Matterhorn of the Dolomites', where all peaks are of striking form, many steep-sided and wedge-shaped, not at all like the original. The first is the Cimone della Pala (3185m; first ascent in 1870); its rival is the nearby Pala di San Martino.

Norway has many striking rock peaks. Though several might deserve it, none has yet earned itself the title 'Matterhorn'. The famous Store Skagastolstind is really a wedge peak. A writer in *AJ* 22 396 has this to say of Stedtind:

'In view of this mountain those who deem the horn of Mont Cervin ugly, would by comparison change their adjective to pretty, nor would the term precipitous be much in evidence were a description of the famous Swiss peak to be written in Stedfjord; not that the general angles of Stedtind much exceed those of the Matterhorn in steepness, but that the former is almost completely armour-plated with smooth polished slabs for the upper 4000 feet, some of which measure at least half that figure in vertical direction.'

More of a 'Matterhorn', it would seem, than the original.

In the Caucasus we come to the first 'Matterhorn' which is higher than the original — Ushba (4710m), a twin-peaked mountain which once again must be viewed end-on for the true effect. The north and south summits were first climbed in 1888 and 1903 respectively.

The contribution of the Arctic to the series is Umanakfels (1200m), the 'Matterhorn of Greenland', first climbed in 1929. In 1948 members of the Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey named a shapely peak near their base at Marguerite Bay in Grahamland — the Neny Matterhorn (1525m). They did not climb it at that time, but it may well have been conquered by now.

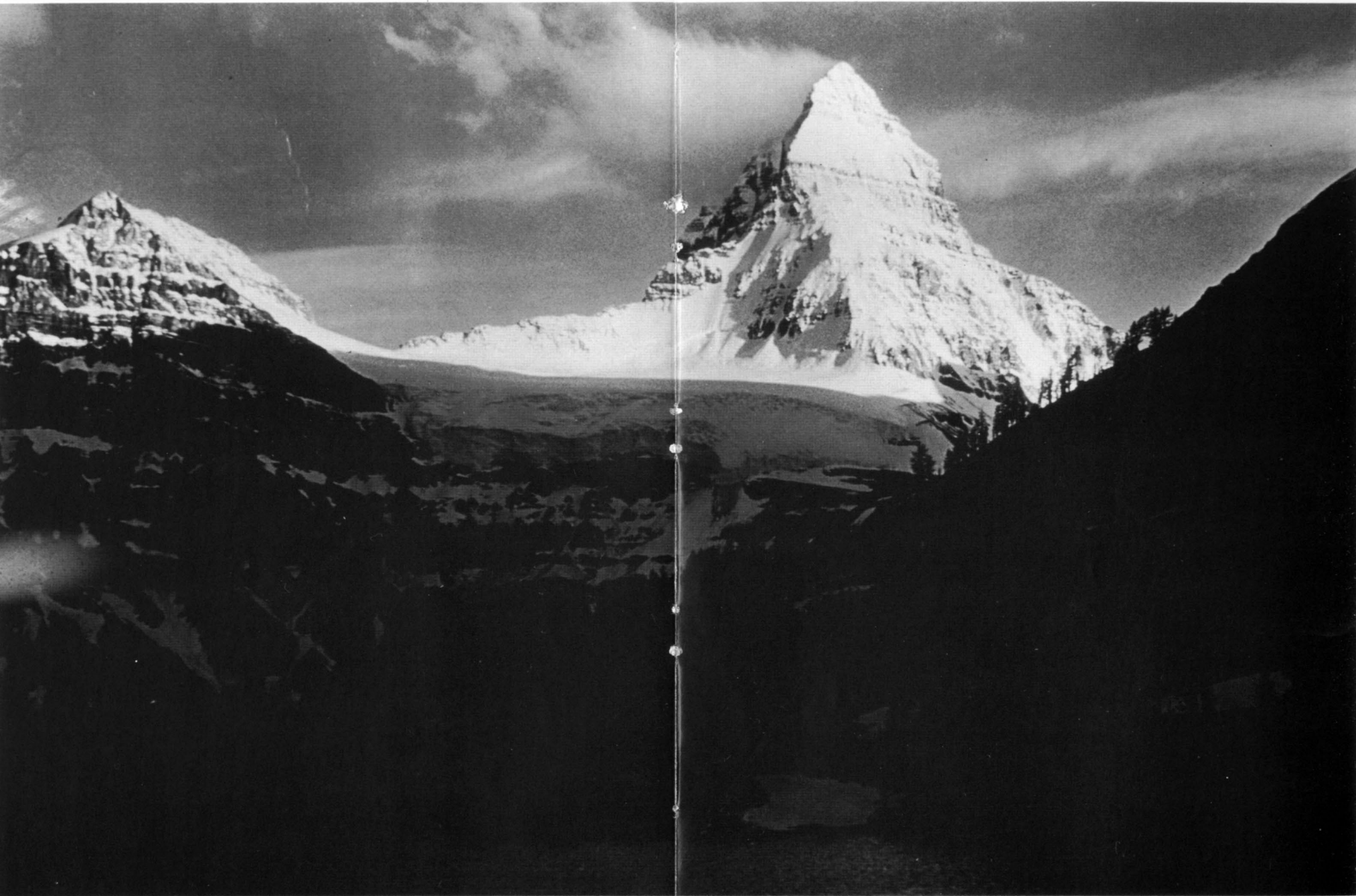


Photo: Frank Solar

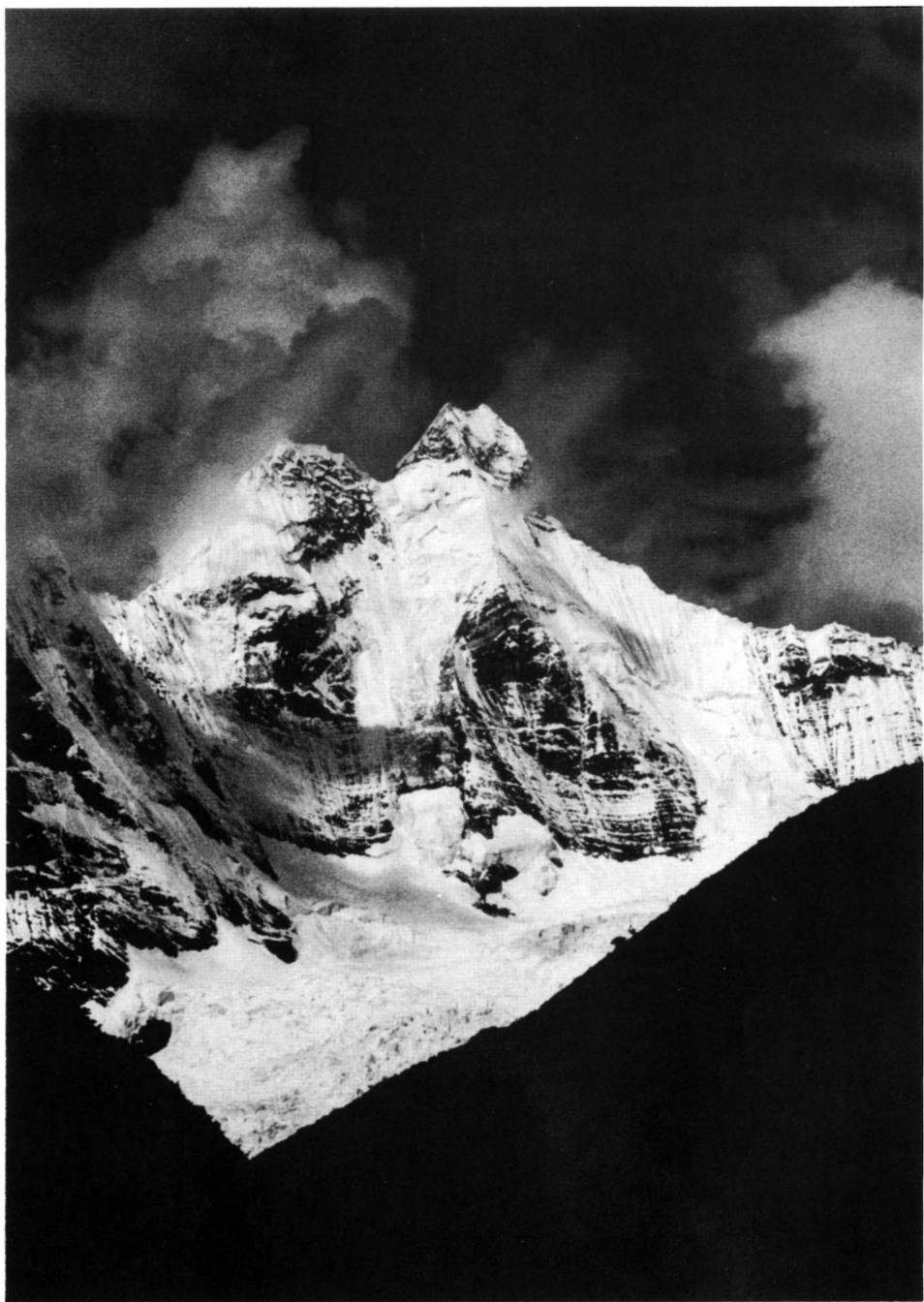


Photo: John Cleare

Africa and its islands seem to offer two more. The Groot Spitzkopf (1817m), the 'Matterhorn of South-west Africa', was first climbed in 1946, using holds cut with a hammer and chisel. Out in the Indian Ocean the Montagne du Rempart on the island of Mauritius has been dubbed 'a vest pocket Matterhorn'.

The 'Matterhorn of New Zealand' is a magnificent isolated mountain. Mount Aspiring (3035m) in the Lake Wanaka area on the borders of Westland and Otago in South Island was first climbed in 1910. Perhaps of all aspirants to the exalted name this is the most worthy and appropriate. Their similarity of outline however does not imply any similarity of origin (see *AJ* 80 59). The Swiss Matterhorn, Basil Booth tells us there, 'is composed of part of the upper limb of a huge fold which was sheared off from its roots to the south and carried to the north as a nappe'. Aspiring, on the other hand, is a result of erosion and was not formed from a nappe.

Five peaks in North America seem for one reason or another to have earned themselves the illustrious name, though in fact not one is really worthy of it. Matterhorn (4142m) is in the Lake City Group near Uncompahgre Peak in Colorado; Matterhorn Peak (3738m) rises at the northern end of the Sierra Nevada in California; Matterhorn (3304m) is the highest summit in a small mountain group in the north-east of Nevada State; Matterhorn in the Wallowa Mountains of Oregon close to the Snake River Gorge is 2997m; finally, much further north, Matterhorn Peak in the Coast Range of British Columbia reaches 2749m. None of these offers a serious climbing problem. Canada also has the magnificent and much more worthy pyramid of Mount Assiniboine (3618m), the so-called 'Matterhorn of the Rockies', not climbed until 1901.

Three South American countries have 'Matterhorns'. In the Cordillera Huayhuash of Peru is Jirishanca (6126m), first climbed in 1957. Further south the image mountain of Bolivia is Kondoriri (Condoriri) (5656m) first ascended in 1941. Chile has Cerro Puntagudo (5949m), the 'Matterhorn of Chile', but further south Torre Pangua (4520m) has also been described in the literature as a Matterhorn. Both these have been climbed in recent years.

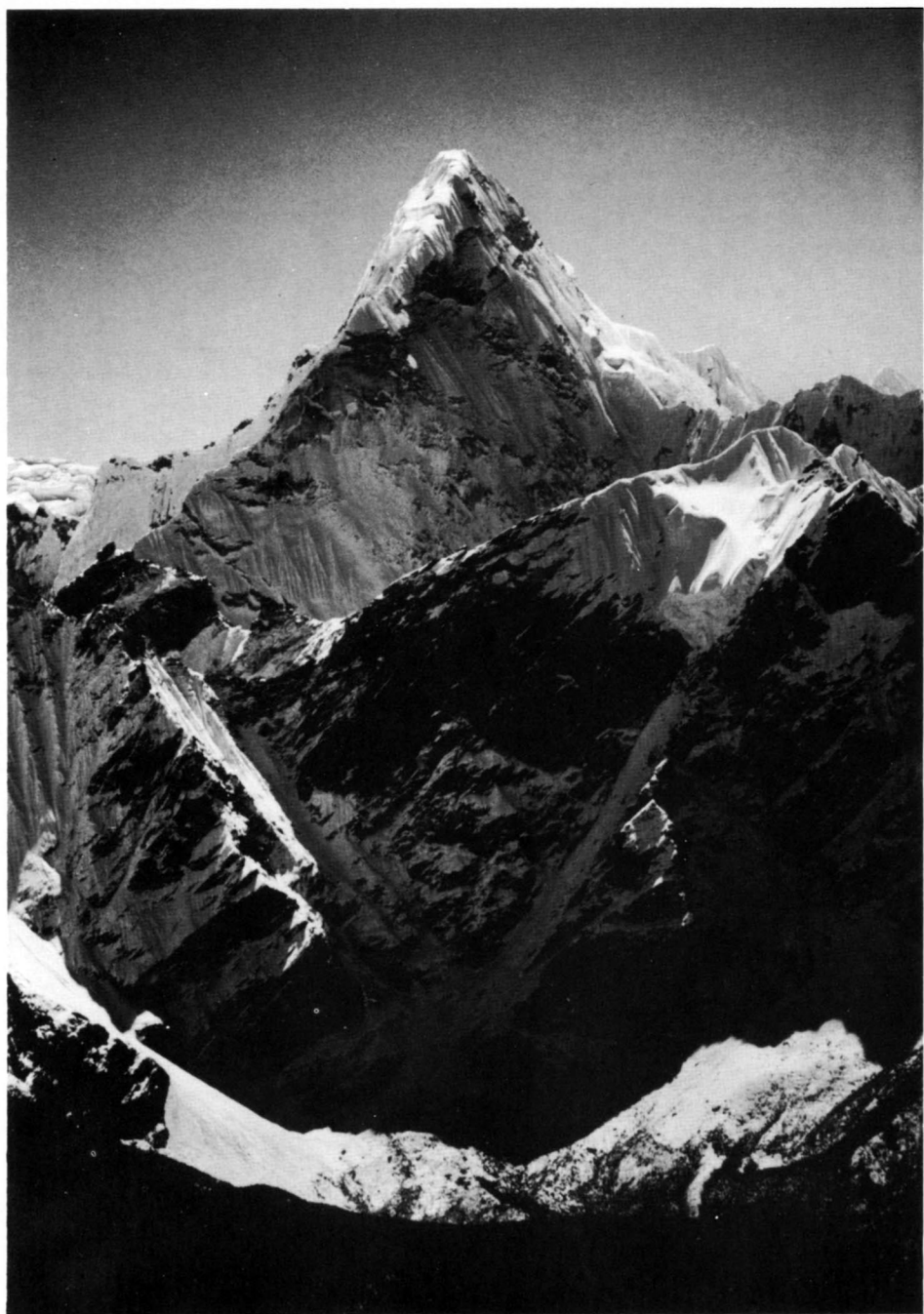
One might expect to find the highest 'Matterhorns' in the world in the great ranges of Asia, and this is indeed the case. German expeditions of the 1930s named Shivling (6543m) — the 'Gangotri Matterhorn'. It was not climbed until 1974, when an Indian expedition made a successful assault. This is another double peak which has therefore to be viewed end-on. And so to the highest of them all — Ama Dablam (6856m), the 'Matterhorn of Nepal', first climbed in 1961. This is a fine steep isolated summit, though it does have a subsidiary peak lower down one of its ridges.

Many other Asian peaks are shapely, steep and isolated, enough to lead to failure of inspiration — maybe there are already sufficient 'Matterhorns'. There are indeed other mountains of even more striking outline to which shapes may in future be referred. The picture books are full of them.



45 *Ushba in the Caucasus seen from NW. The S Peak is on the right, the N Peak is on the left*

Photo: John Cleare



46 *Ama Dablam, Nepal, seen from NNW.*