

THE FIRST ASCENT OF THE ZERMATT BREITHORN.

BY W. A. B. COOLIDGE.

THERE has been some discussion of late years among climbers as to what constitutes a 'first ascent,' or 'first passage.' The object of this note is to call attention to one point relating to first ascents—whether a duly recorded ascent which has been overlooked can rank as a first ascent, and therefore displace another claim which had hitherto been regarded as good. It seems to me that, when found, this recorded but forgotten ascent is certainly entitled to take precedence of any other claim; and that the following ascent falls under this rule, so that it must now be put in its rightful position.

Some time ago, when turning over the pages of the first edition (1841) of Joanne's 'Itinéraire de la Suisse,' I came across these words,* which occur (p. 614) in an historical sketch of the exploration of Monte Rosa, and come immediately after a summary of De Saussure's ascents in that district:—

'Longtemps après, en 1813, "Le Moniteur" publia la relation d'une prétendue ascension au Mont-Rose, par un M. H. Maynard, qui avait tout simplement gravi une des deux cimes au S.-E. du Col *Saint-Théodule*.'

I was greatly surprised by this mention of an expedition to which I could then find no allusion in the recognised books of reference, and which was as unknown to the various living authorities on Alpine history whom I consulted, as to myself. I at first thought that M. Maynard was an Englishman, but this turned out to be an unfounded idea, when (through the kindness of my friend Monsieur Henry Duhamel) I succeeded in obtaining a copy of the narrative alluded to in Joanne.

This occurs on p. 1045 of No. 265 (Wednesday, September 22, 1813) of 'Le Moniteur Universel,' and runs as follows:—

'Turin, le 14 septembre.

'On écrit de Genève qu'un voyageur français, M. Henri Maynard, accompagné de Marie Joseph Contet [*sic*] de Chamouny, ancien guide de M. de Saussure, a monté le Mont-Rose le 13 août 1813.

'Le Mont-Rose, comme on sait, est situé entre le Vallais et le Piémont, et s'élève à une hauteur de 2,430 toises au-dessus de la mer. C'est à peu près le hauteur du Mont-Blanc qui, selon M. de Saussure, est de 2,450 toises: comme lui, il est couvert de neiges éternelles; personne n'avait encore entrepris de le monter.

'Les voyageurs, partis de Châtillon, dans la Vallée d'Aoste, le jeudi 12 août 1813, remontèrent le Val-Tornanche jusqu'aux chalets du Breuil, situés à 1,130 toises au-dessus de la mer.

'Le même jour, à onze heures du soir, à la faveur du clair de lune, ils sont partis des chalets du Breuil, avec Jean-Gras Erin, Jean-

* They appear also in the second (1853) edition, p. 227, and in the third (1859) edition, p. 399, of the same work.

Baptiste Erin, son fils, et Jean-Jacques Erin, son neveu, tous habitants du Val-Tornanche. Ils sont arrivés le vendredi 13 août à cinq heures du matin sur le col de Saint-Théodule ou du Mont Cervin, situé à 1,736 toises au-dessus de la mer, et sont parvenus sur la cime du Mont-Rose à midi et demi, sans accident et sans éprouver de très grandes difficultés, mais extrêmement fatigués de la rareté de l'air, et le visage tout brûlé par la réverbération des neiges. Ils ont déposé sur la cime diverses monnaies de France et du royaume d'Italie de l'année actuelle 1813. Les guides ont fait constater le voyage par M. Jacques Maynet, maire de la commune de Val-Tornanche, lequel résidait alors dans son habitation d'été, aux chalets du Breuil.

'Il est à désirer que les amateurs de géologie puissent avoir une relation de ce voyage, avec les observations auxquelles il a dû donner lieu.'

This account is rather vague and unsatisfactory; but one point is quite clear—that the peak ascended was *not* Monte Rosa itself, but some other point of the chain. The time stated to have been employed from the Theodul to the summit ($7\frac{1}{2}$ hrs.) is too short for the great distance between the pass and the peak, especially when we take into consideration the long time the party took from Breuil to the pass, which shows that they were not fast goers. Then, too, the fact that they did not encounter any very great difficulties tells against their claim to have ascended Monte Rosa, for the crevasses on the plateaux on the S. side of the range would undoubtedly have given them a great deal of trouble, particularly in days when glaciers were so little known and so much feared. Hence we may take it as tolerably certain that the peak ascended in 1813 was not Monte Rosa, thus agreeing with Joanne and with Von Welden, in whose book* I have very recently found a summary of the 'Moniteur' narrative.

Which, then, was the peak climbed in 1813? I was at first inclined to think of one of the Zwillinge, for which the times would suit better than for Monte Rosa. But there still remains the fact that the difficulties of crossing the crevassed plateaux on the S. side of the range would have warranted a party in those days in laying much more stress than they do on the perils of the journey and less on the inconvenience caused by the reflection of the sun's rays. Then, too, I have found a small bit of evidence that makes me pretty certain that the peak really reached was the Breithorn.

It is expressly stated that the M. J. Couttet who was with the 1813 party was De Saussure's old guide. Now, it is certain † that Couttet was the head guide on the ascent of the Little Matterhorn made on August 13, 1792, by De Saussure (during his three days' stay on the Theodul), who calls it 'Cime Brune du Breithorn.' It appears from De Saussure's description that his party saw a snowy peak to the E., higher than their 'Cime Brune.' Further, it is clear that it was for purely personal reasons that he did not ascend this higher peak. He was tired, and feared the steepness of the final slope, and, chief of all,

* *Der Monte Rosa*, 1824, p. 7.

† See De Saussure's *Voyages*, vol. iv. pp. 408, 415, 416.

he particularly wished to obtain geological specimens, which, he supposed, would not be found on this higher point, apparently consisting altogether of snow. It thus seems as if the choice of the peak to be ascended in 1792 was made solely by De Saussure, and that it was not at all improbable that his guide wished to go to the higher point while, for the reasons mentioned, he preferred the lower. What more likely than that the recollection of this higher peak remained in Couttet's mind, and that when, twenty-one years later, he found himself in the same neighbourhood with an employer who was less of a *savant* (notice that in the 1813 account nothing is said of observations being taken, as was usual on mountain ascents in those days) and probably younger and more active than De Saussure, he should have led him up the peak which he had missed before, particularly when (as appears from what he told Mr. Clissold in 1822—see below) he did not anticipate any great difficulties on the ascent? These are but conjectures, yet I think not improbable ones, given the ascertained fact that the same man was the leading guide in 1792 and 1813. At any rate they are sufficient as against the claim of the Zwillinge, while the 1813 peak is clearly not that of 1792, which Couttet knew already, and thus the Breithorn is left as the only candidate for the honour. The length of time taken on the ascent in 1813 will not surprise anyone acquainted with old books of Alpine travel.

Mr. Tuckett attributes the first recorded ascent of the Breithorn to Sir John Herschel, in 1821.* Mr. Ball,† writing a few years later, states that Lord Minto had preceded Sir J. Herschel, but gives no date. Is it possible that by a slip of the pen Mr. Ball wrote 'Minto' in place of 'Maynard,' and that the 'Henri Maynard' of 1813 was really 'Henry Maynard,' who was born in 1786, and succeeded, in 1824, as third and last Viscount Maynard? However this may be, the M. Maynard of 1813 holds the field, in my opinion, against all other claimants to the honour of having made the first recorded ascent of the Breithorn.

Possibly the allusion to an ascent of Monte Rosa made by Mr. Clissold,‡ writing in 1822, refers to the 1813 ascent. Mr. W. Long-

* *Peaks, Passes, and Glaciers*. Second series, vol. ii. p. 260.

† *Western Alps*, p. 324, followed by Studer's *Ueber Eis und Schnee*, ii. 204.

‡ *Narrative of an Ascent to the Summit of Mont Blanc, August 18, 1822* (London, 1823), p. 28:—

'The summit [of Mont Blanc] presented a much larger area than Contet had ever before seen, though this was his sixth ascent [Mr. Clissold's was the eleventh recorded ascent]. It is supposed, therefore, that a portion of the previous altitude of the mountain had fallen; and hence, as Mont Rosa differs in height from Mont Blanc only about one hundred feet, it is probable that they may sometimes approach nearer to equality of height than is often considered.' [At this point there is the following footnote.] 'Contet states that the traveller requires only three or four guides for the ascent of Mont Rosa, as its summit may be gained with comparatively little hazard and labour; indeed, one of the monks of the Convent of Grand St. Bernard related to me that one of their order ascended Mont Rosa with only one guide.' [This last ascent is clearly that of the Vélán, made on August 31, 1779, by M. Murith, Prior of the Great St. Bernard, but is mentioned here in order to show how vaguely the name Monte Rosa was then used. Mr. Clissold's tex

man * considered it probable that the peak Mr. Clissold was thinking of was really the Breithorn, which would exactly agree with my conjectures. This is rendered even more probable by the fact that Mr. Clissold derived his information from Joseph Marie Couette, whom, by reason of his repeated ascents of Mont Blanc, we may assume to have been the guide of 1792 and 1813, and who may quite genuinely have supposed that the peak he climbed in 1813 was really Monte Rosa.†

ALPINE NOTES.

THE PUNTA BIANCA.—This fine peak (12,471 feet) is so overshadowed by its immediate neighbour the Grivola that it was long most undeservedly neglected. Mr. Frederick Gardiner and I went up it on August 12, 1889, and claimed 'provisionally' to have made the first ascent, since to my great surprise I could find out nothing about any previous visit to it.‡ Signor Vaccarone himself, even in the third edition of his useful 'Statistica delle Prime Ascensioni,' published in the spring of 1890, was not aware of any ascent save ours.§ All that was known about the peak up to the summer of 1890—with this one exception—was that Mr. Tuckett had spent the night of July 6-7, 1859 (on occasion of an attempt on the Grivola), on the lofty ridge between the peak and the Grivola, which he had reached (by traversing the S.E. face, W. arête, and N.W. face of the peak) from Val Savaranche and crossed to Cogne, naming his pass the Col de la Grivola. But it was certain from the text of his narrative,|| and still more from his accurate sketches,¶ that he had not mounted to the summit of the Punta Bianca.

And yet it is now ascertained beyond a doubt that the first ascent was made as far back as 1858, and had been duly recorded at the time in an Italian newspaper. This account is to be found in the narrative of the first attempt to reach the Grivola, printed in the *Feuille d'Aoste* of October 28, 1858, and reprinted (where I first came across it) on pp. 399-402 of Mrs. Cole's 'A Lady's Tour round Monte Rosa' (London: 1859).** The Punta Bianca was thus first ascended on September 21, 1858, by Monsieur P. B. Chamonin, the curé of Cogne,

then continues with the following remarkable statement, as to which one would like to know more.] 'Buonaparte had a column of wood raised, respectively, on Mont Blanc, Mont Rosa, and Mont Buet, for the purpose of facilitating surveys. These columns were erected several years since; but, as they are now invisible, it is supposed that they have been swept away by avalanches.'

* *Alpine Journal*, vol. viii. Appendix on 'Modern Mountaineering,' p. 30.

† As to the way in which the name 'Monte Rosa' was applied to different peaks, see my *Swiss Travel*, pp. 316, 317.

‡ *Alpine Journal*, vol. xiv. pp. 483-4. § See No. 351.

|| *Peaks, Passes and Glaciers*, 2nd series, vol. ii. pp. 295, 297, 310.

¶ *Ibid.* pp. 268, 309, and particularly that on p. 286.

** *Alpine Journal*, vol. viii. p. 56.