

THE ALPINE CLUB AND THE ALPINE CLIMBING GROUP

By A. K. RAWLINSON

THE Club shall be called the Alpine Club. The object of the Club shall be the promotion of good fellowship among mountaineers, of mountain climbing and mountain exploration throughout the world, and of better knowledge of the mountains through literature, science and art'. These words begin our rules. They sum up the purpose of the merger between the Club and the Alpine Climbing Group which, after much discussion during the past year, came into effect by the general wish of both bodies on July 1, 1967. *The Club is the Alpine Club. The Alpine Climbing Group, while intended to retain its identity and special characteristics, has become a special section within the Alpine Club, an integral part of the Club itself. Although the new rules provide for an experimental period of five years during which the two bodies could separate again at the option of either, it is hoped that the goodwill on both sides which has brought about the merger will make it both enduring and fruitful. The Club has extended its fellowship to the leaders of the younger generation of British climbers. To them it offers new opportunities. From them the Club will gain new vigour and new enterprise. All concerned hope that together they may more effectually promote the common objects, and enhance the future of the famous Club of which they are all now fellow-members.*

So notable an event in the history of the Club must be recorded in the *Alpine Journal*; and it has been suggested that, although present members of the Club are familiar with these matters, some account of the reasons why the merger was proposed, and of the steps that led up to it, may be of interest at least in the future, when present memories have faded.

The Alpine Climbing Group was founded during the winter of 1952-53. Its first President, Tom Bourdillon, wrote a note about it in the *Alpine Journal* for 1956¹: 'The renaissance of British climbing in the Alps after the hiatus of the war years has been slow and is still far from complete. During and immediately after the war there were remarkable advances in the techniques of alpinism on the Continent, but these were balanced by the equally dramatic raising of the standard of free rock climbing in Great Britain, and it is curious that there should not have been a more rapid revival of British climbing in the

¹ *A. J.* 61. 212.

Alps. One of the reasons for the failure is that in Britain it has been hard to learn much about current Alpine climbing.... It was against this background that the Alpine Climbing Group was founded some three years ago. Its object is to encourage mountaineering of a high standard principally by promoting acquaintance between mountaineers and by spreading information about mountain routes. It owes a great deal to the *Groupe de Haute Montagne* and to that excellent and much lamented magazine, *Alpinisme*. Membership is limited to those who are active mountaineers and who have shown themselves thoroughly competent in the Alps. Retirement is automatic at the age of forty.... The Group is thus not competitive with the Alpine Club, but rather serves to provide contact between the younger members of the Alpine Club and other young climbers who have achieved Alpine routes of a high standard'.

The founders of the Group hoped to advance British climbing in the Alps. Their hopes have been fulfilled. The Group has flourished. The renaissance to which Bourdillon referred has enormously developed. The Group has played its part in leading the way.

The Club and the Group have always maintained friendly relations, and in recent years have collaborated in certain projects, such as a rescue insurance scheme and the current series of Alpine guidebooks in English, which was one of the first interests of the Group. Friendly relations were natural. There has always been a considerable overlap of membership. Most of the founders and many of the original members of the Group were also members of the Club, or have subsequently become so. But the overlap has shown signs of diminishing, especially among the full, i.e. active, members of the Group. This was one of the main considerations behind the idea of the merger from the point of view of the Alpine Club.

The Club has had the good fortune to welcome over the years a good flow of new members, including a good proportion of young and active climbers. Yet it has become evident that the Club has been becoming less representative than in the past of British climbing generally, and especially less representative of the leaders of the currently active generation. This deficiency could have become serious. The Club has never sought to limit its membership to outstanding climbers; its good tradition has been to bring into its fellowship the average mountaineer no less than the tiger. But the foundation of its influence on the history of mountaineering, of its international status, and of its attraction for new members, has been the fact that most of the leading British mountaineers have belonged to it. If the standing and influence of the Club is to be maintained in modern conditions, it has become essential to broaden its membership; and it must continue to include, among others, the leading young climbers of the day.

Some of these have been members of the Club anyway, but until now, some have not. But they have, in general, been members of the Alpine Climbing Group. The Group included at the start, and has continued to attract, the great majority of British climbers qualified to its exacting standards. These standards have been kept stringent, and indeed raised as the general standard of Alpine achievement rises among young climbers. Candidates for full membership must show a record of varied experience indicating proved ability to lead safely Alpine routes, both rock and ice, which are not only of a high standard of technical difficulty but of a length and seriousness to make them genuinely big mountaineering routes. The original rule of automatic retirement at the age of forty has been relaxed in a few exceptional cases, but it has been firmly maintained that full members who cease climbing at the standard expected for new members must pass to the retired list, even if they are still climbing actively on lesser routes. Thus the Group is essentially a body of active climbers, mostly young, including most of those British climbers currently doing the harder Alpine routes.

The stringent rules about qualification and retirement have been an important reason for the keenness of young climbers to join the Group, being accepted as aspirants if not yet fully qualified. But these rules have meant that the number of full members, who alone can play a part in running the Group, has remained small. It has recently been about sixty. In addition, there is a fairly rapid turn-over, as full members no longer so active pass to the retired list. This small and changing membership has imposed certain limitations on the Group's practical activity. Its international contacts have been limited for the same reason, and also by the fact that mountaineers of other countries look naturally to the Alpine Club as the body traditionally representative of British climbing in the Alps and greater ranges. For the Group the merger offers a way through these constraints, as well as a direct voice in the policy and affairs of the senior Club.

Although not recognised at the time, the immediate seeds of the merger may be traced to the Matterhorn centenary celebrations in Zermatt and Breuil-Cervinia in 1965. The generous invitations received by the Alpine Club from our Swiss and Italian friends, and the regard expressed during the proceedings for the Alpine Club and its traditions, were not only a reminder of the Club's great past, but a stimulus to thought about its future. Once developed, the idea of the merger seemed an obvious and effective move to carry forward the collaboration already begun between the Club and the Group, and to meet the needs described—of the Club for a more representative membership among the leading young climbers, of the Group for a larger base and for closer touch with the wider mountaineering world.

Informal discussions began in the autumn of 1965. In due course the Committee of the Alpine Club authorised an official approach to the Group. The response was favourable and detailed proposals were worked out. An important date was Sunday, June 26, 1966, when the negotiators appointed by the two committees, Emlyn Jones and I representing the Alpine Club, and John Brailsford, John Alexander and Terry Sullivan representing the Alpine Climbing Group, met at Brailsford's house at 2, East Close, Abbey Meadows, Darley Abbey, Derby, and there reached agreement on terms to be recommended to the two bodies as a basis on which the merger could take place if the parties were willing.

The proposed terms were circulated to members of the Alpine Club in September. A lively discussion took place at a general meeting at 74, South Audley Street on October 25, 1966. That meeting, and a large number of letters received by the Committee from members unable to be present, indicated a considerable measure of support for the idea, but some criticisms were also expressed. The Committee therefore decided to continue discussions with the Group, but to re-negotiate certain features of the scheme. The further negotiations led to a fresh agreement on revised terms. These were formally accepted by the Alpine Climbing Group at the Group's annual general meeting at the Pen-y-Gwryd Hotel, North Wales, on Saturday, March 17, 1967. They were then circulated to the Alpine Club, and all members were invited to vote in a general postal poll. There was also further discussion at a general meeting on May 9. The poll showed an overwhelming majority of votes in favour of the scheme. It remained for the Alpine Club to pass formally at a general meeting the necessary amendments of its rules. This was done, with virtual unanimity, at 74, South Audley Street on Tuesday June, 6, 1967. The new rules came into effect on July 1.

What has been achieved? The merger has at once extended the membership of the Alpine Club to include members of the Alpine Climbing Group. This, in a formal sense, was one main object, but in itself it is a formality. It will not automatically produce the benefits for which many of us hope. It is now for all concerned, to see to it that the opportunities which have been created are used. Each generation of mountaineers differs from its predecessors. It learns from its elders, discards ideas which have lost their usefulness, and adds its own contribution. Let us continue, in the future as in the past, within the fellowship of *the* Club, the Alpine Club.