
THOMAS VENNIN

The Birth of Mountaineering

A Piquant Stroll through the History of Alpinism



The illustrations for this selection of Thomas Vennin's *brèves* are the work of American artist Sheridan Anderson (1936-84), who captured the rebellious mood of climbing in the 1960s and 1970s.

*In 2019, the French writer and blogger Thomas Vennin published **La dent du piment**, a less than reverent or indeed accurate date-by-date take on the serious business of mountaineering history. 'The Spice Tower' is a lot of fun with more truth than you might expect. Vennin is a self-confessed armchair mountaineer who lives in Bordeaux and learned very quickly not to take things too seriously, as these excerpts illustrate. Translation by Eric Vola.*

Mountaineers have a problem with the last great problem. Each time the last great problem is solved, a new one arises from nowhere. What will they invent now they have made the famous first winter ascent of K2? The pirouette that concludes this book¹ suggests going to Mars and having a look there, but forecasts from eminent scientists studying the future of our

1. T Vennin, *La dent du piment: Balade épicée dans l'histoire de l'alpinisme*, Guérin, Chamonix, 2019.

planet suggest we may wish to consider a post-apocalypse ascent of Everest. We shall see.

Whether it is on Mars or a restyled Earth, the future of alpinism necessarily exists. Man, that innocent, cannot restrain himself from setting out to see what is going on up there. And so, perhaps one day someone will have the privilege to write a new story. And as far as this show is concerned, to do better than what has gone before will require some serious stuff. The little compendium that follows attests to that: our glorious predecessors did put the bar quite high, the scamps!

40 million years ago

After a monsoon evening and a bit too much wine, the Eurasian Plate wakes up with a severe hangover and the vague memory of a tectonic dance with the Indian Plate. Several months later, she gives birth to a charming baby 3,000km long and 8,848m high. The Heavenly Father is hopping mad but quickly falls under the spell of little Himalaya: 'Here is one who will make heads turn,' he (most likely) whispered, with a touch of concern in his voice.

Biblical Times

With no sponsor or logistics, Moses arrives at the foot of Mount Sinai simply equipped with a Gore-Tex tunic and his famous sandals. After the first rope lengths climbed at a headlong pace, despite the flood, the prophet sets the tone: he is going for an all-time record. At the crux move of the Burning Bush, the elements rage in a storm and lightning falls a few centimetres from his *piolet*. But Moses is touched with the grace of the Divine, nothing can stop him, and he literally flies up the mountain. On the summit, he is astounded to find God himself who gives him a severe tongue-lashing: 'Commandment number one? You don't climb mountains!' Mad with rage, Moses smashes the tablets of the Law on a rock and starts his descent. At base camp he falls into the arms of Aaron, his brother, mad with anxiety. To this day, Moses didn't get a Piolet d'Or for his contribution.

Year 1280

The Italian monk Fra Salimbene, pioneer of Alpine chronicles, relates that Peter III, king of Aragon, ascended the awesome Pic Canigou (2784m) in the Pyrenees. From his account, the king was soon abandoned by his two rope-mates, terrified by the storm, decides to carry on, solo, up to the summit where he finds a lake from which he sees a gigantic dragon emerging. Problem: the only known lake is the Estanyols, 500m below the summit and, as far as the specialists are concerned, you'll find more marmots than dragons. The tradition of taking an alpinist at his word is already in a bad way.

27 April 1336

Petrarch, the poet, climbs Mont Ventoux (1912m) with his brother Gherardo. To have his name inserted in the chronicles of alpinism for climbing a mountain easily accessible today by bicycle is the real achievement of



Petrarch, who was as much an alpinist as the Queen of England. This categorical point of view will have to be revisited eventually when a Tour de France stage concludes on the summit of the Grandes Jorasses.

26 June 1492

King Charles VIII is fed up with Christopher Columbus banging on about his proposed voyage across the sea. So for a change of topic, he orders Antoine de Ville to go into the mountains and climb to the summit of Mont Aiguille (2087m). This time, there's no 'has perhaps climbed', no dragons and above all, no cycle-able mountain pastures. Mont Aiguille is actually steep! Twenty seriously equipped guys are required to get to the top. A military organisation: the route is located, a siege starts, similar to the siege of a fortified castle, ladders and fixed ropes are used ... In short, 461 years before the conquest of Everest, it is in the Dauphiné that the heavy Himalayan expedition is invented.

'Antoine! What do you see from up there?' yells the king who stayed at the bottom. 'The sea, your majesty!'



19 June 1741

The English show up in Chamonix. Disguised as though going off to mass and armed to the teeth to deter natives who are rumoured to be wild savages, eight subjects of His Majesty led by the young student William Windham and the adventurer Richard Pococke get up to Montanvers and discover, dumbfounded, the Mer de Glace, the Chamonix Aiguilles and Mont Blanc. The Chamoniard is discovered to be a non-violent primate, though a little too insistent with his traditional Alpine occupation: hawking key fobs and snow globes.

1760

Horace-Bénédict de Saussure, aristocrat from Geneva and no less marvelously dressed, finds an aim to his life during a journey to Chamonix that brings him to the foot of Mont Blanc. From that moment, the summit will not cease to haunt his nights. But the young Horace-Bénédict is particularly smart and knows that iron willpower and an unpronounceable surname are not enough to turn oneself into an alpinist. He knows as well that alone, he will get nowhere. So, he has the idea to entice the natives in proposing some reward in hard cash to those who would dare to take a risk up there and find a route to the summit. He even promises the jackpot to the one who reaches the summit. Along with being backward, the Chamoniard now becomes greedy ... but the idea of HBDS is not so ludicrous for as well encouraging the first attempts on Mont Blanc, he also lays down the first steps in the valley's mountain guide trade.

22 December 1857

Today is the birthday, in Great Britain, of the first alpine club. Even though they were spending all their summers conquering the highest summits, British alpinists spent the winter moping around their Victorian living rooms with that fundamental and unresolvable question: how, *my dear*, to put a peg in with a cup of tea? Given the complexity of the question, Her Majesty's subjects decide to group together and create the elitist Alpine Club, electing John Ball as their first president. To keep honking at it they create the periodical *Peaks, Passes and Glaciers* which will be replaced from 2 March 1863 with the *very famous Alpine Journal* the reading of which allows one to understand how, during this period modestly labelled 'the Golden Age of alpinism', the activity of scrambling up peaks became, thanks to the English, a *gentleman's* sport.

23 July 1860

Edward Whymper, a young English engraver, blows his mind discovering the Matterhorn during a journey to Zermatt, where his father has sent him to fulfil an order from the Alpine Club to illustrate the book being published for its third anniversary. Edward Whymper is the one holding the pencil, but it is the mountain that will engrave itself in his head. Back in London, our young friend will have but one aim in life, to return to Switzerland and be the first to climb the Matterhorn.

1865

And lo, Chomolungma became Everest. At the beginning of the 1800s, the British undertake to endow India with cartography worthy of the name and launch the *Great Trigonometrical Survey*. From 1823, a certain George Everest takes things in hand and sends teams to explore the farthest regions to triangulate everything that does not move. Reaching the foot of the mountains of Himalaya, their theodolites go batso with one of them displaying the extravagant altitude of 8,840 metres. After checking and rechecking the square on the hypotenuse, Andrew Waugh, who took over from George Everest, decrees that this is the highest mountain in the world and proposes to name it Everest to honour the tremendous work of his predecessor. Using the excuse that it couldn't find a local name, which was the custom to keep, the Royal Geographical Society ratifies Waugh's proposal in 1865. Yet Chomolungma, as the Tibetans have always called the mountain, did appear on much older maps. Meantime, the Nepalis, of whom nothing was asked, decide that for them, they will use Sagarmatha. Some historians report that the affair was finally settled during a legendary game of rock-paper-scissor between Queen Victoria and the Dalai Lama during their historic and not at all fictitious meeting. The sheet feverishly held out by his holiness having been massacred by the Queen's scissors, we all say Everest and that's that.

29 June 1865

The flamboyant first ascent of the Aiguille Verte by Edward Whymper and his guides Christian Almer and Franz Biener. Four years after engraving it, Whymper has still not climbed the Matterhorn. Fed up with his repeated failed attempts and persuaded that the Matterhorn will end by killing them, his guides said 'Stop!' The flags are red, the weather is grey and the idea's black ... So, Whymper chooses the Verte (geddit?), which he climbs in two kicks. With their noses out of joint that an Englishman climbed their totem before they could, the most vociferous Chamoniards propose duffing Whymper up if he can't prove his success. Luckily for Whymper, Michel Croz comes through, calming them down in taking his side. The following week, Croz will even avenge the insult by putting up a new route on the Verte with Ambroise Ducroz, himself a Chamoniard. The story could have ended there, if that devil Whymper had not already gone again to the Matterhorn ...

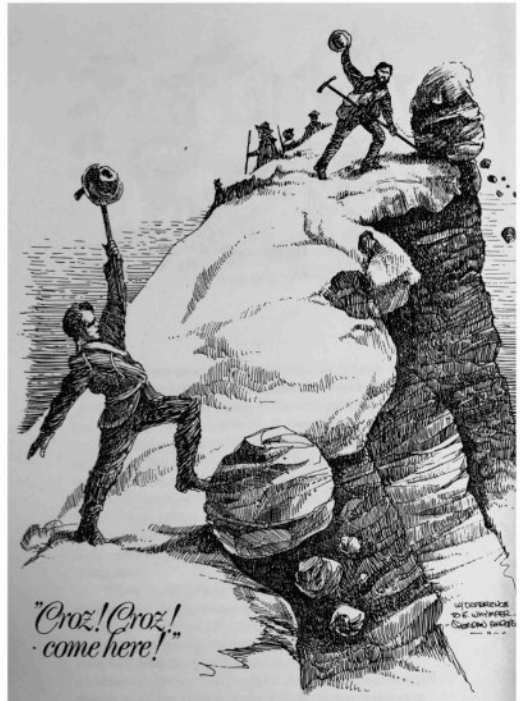
14 July 1865

Matterhorn first ascent. After 8 July 1786 and the first ascent of Mont Blanc, 14 July 1865 marks the second greatest date in the history of alpinism. Several days after his success on the Verte, Whymper is back in Zermatt for a new attempt on the Matterhorn, now persuaded that the key is the Hörnli ridge on the Swiss side. Jean-Antoine Carrel, an Italian guide from Valtournenche who had participated in the previous attempts, gives his agreement to Whymper to go with him before finally, without telling him, making a new commitment with the Italian government for another attempt from the other side.

Raging mad, Whymper recruits the first guides closest to hand. No matter their skills, he must be ahead of the Italian attempt and Jean-Antoine Carrel, the traitor. It is then that he crosses the path of another Englishman, Lord Francis Douglas who is hanging around with his two guides: Peter Taugwalder and his son who bears the same name. The three agree to follow him. Several hours later, the party bump into Michel Croz. The famous guide has been recruited by the Rev Charles Hudson and the young Douglas Robert Hadow whose lack of experience makes Whymper hesitate. But he has no choice. If he takes Croz, he must take all of them.

If the choice of men is doubtful, the choice of route is good and by 1.40pm Whymper at last grasps his victory. While in a bit of a pickle way down on the Italian side, the poor Carrel suddenly notices some pebbles sadistically thrown down from the summit informing him of his defeat. Succumbing to his euphoria, Whymper envisages for one moment letting the Italian know about the rumours he's heard of an acquaintance between Carrel's progenitor and some bawdy *bersagliere* but the distance between the two men fortunately saves decorum and Carrel, dismayed, goes back down.

Too busy savouring his moment of grace, Whymper does not realise that the young and far too tender Hadow had been for quite a while on the brink of apoplexy and that their descent will start under worrying auspices. Croz takes things in hand and the lead, placing Hadow just behind him. And then, the drama ... Some 80 metres below the summit, Hadow slides down both feet first and hits Croz with full force. In their fall, both men



pull down Douglas and Hudson who topple over in the void with them. The Taugwalders and Whymper, spared by destiny, are the only survivors of this mythical ascent which marks the terrible end of the Golden Age of alpinism.

30 June 1868

Guided by Melchior Anderegg, Johan Jaun and Julien Grange, the Englishman Horace Walker gives his name to the highest point of the Grandes Jorasses and consequently, when climbed by the tremendous north side, to one of the greatest climbs in the Alps: the Walker Spur. Edward Whymper had already been in the neighbourhood to observe the Aiguille Verte, but because it was socked in with mist did not judge it useful to go up to the highest peak, contenting himself with the lower summit today named La Pointe Whymper. In some ways Edward was quite lazy...

2 April 1874

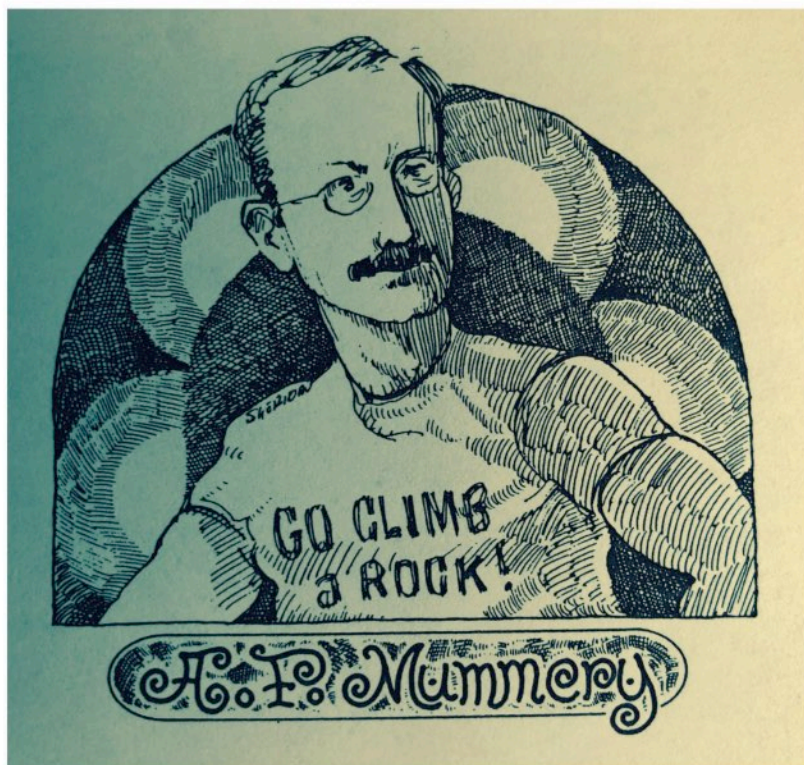
Birth of the Club Alpin Français, a French equivalent to the very distinguished British Alpine Club. While they were spending their summers observing the British conquer the highest summits of the Alps, the French alpinists spent winters moping about in the Parisian bistros with this haunting and fundamental question: how, my good lady, do the English manage to put in those blasted pegs with their cup of tea? Considering the complexity of the question, the founder members of the CAF decide to orientate their activity towards a more noble cause: spreading knowledge about mountains and encouraging participation. So, the mountains are fitted out with the first refuges, national parks are created, like the one for the Écrins, the first school trips are organised to enable French schoolchildren to discover the mountains – and one contemplates La Meije ...

16 August 1877

First ascent of La Meije by Emmanuel Boileau de Castelnau, member of the newly born Club Alpin Français (CAF), with guides Pierre Gaspard and son. After the conquest of the Matterhorn, the British decreed that all the great summits of the Alps had been climbed and that ended the Golden Age of alpinism. No argument. *Excuse me, Sir* [in English in the original], but that summit, just over there, a little to one side, what's wrong with that one? La Meije not classy enough to grace your Victorian living rooms? It smells gassy? That's the problem? *Le gaz*?² Maybe you were a little scared and put it to one side, hoping everyone would forget this small summit that doesn't even top 4,000m. It's true; some pitches are a bit spooky ... But ask the elder Gaspard. He didn't have the jitters getting up the famous pyramid blocking access to the summit on the south face. You can speak also with his client, the young Boileau de Castelnau, eminent *Cafiste*³, just 19 years old but with guts to have Whymper quavering. And young Gaspard? Sent as a scout, as cannon

2. From the climber's expression: *il ya du gaz* meaning 'it is airy' as for example in: 'this traverse is bloody airy!'

3. Meaning, someone associated with the CAF.



fodder, up the most perilous pitches! There is the first great and splendid success of French alpinism stamped 'CAF': La Meije, *last but not least*.

1880

The British climber Albert Frederick Mummery and his Swiss guide Alexander Burgener attempt the south-west face of the Dent du Géant but rapidly give up faced with the technical difficulties. Before turning back, Mummery takes out a calling card on which he scrawls the following information: 'Absolutely inaccessible by fair means.' He slides the card in a bottle and gets home without knowing that the expression 'by fair means' will become as legendary as himself in Alpine circles, and even in Himalayan ones, where today one uses it to evoke an ascent without Sherpas, without fixed ropes and above all without supplementary oxygen. On the normal route of Everest, it is not rare to find calling cards with the variant 'By filthy means' inside oxygen bottles abandoned between a turd and a tibia.

5 August 1881

First ascent of the Aiguille du Grépon by Albert Frederick Mummery, Alexandre Burgener and Benedikt Venetz. Every pivotal period is symbolised by an alpinist and the mountain their name is attached to. After Saussure and

Mont Blanc, after Whymper and the Matterhorn, here is Mummery and the Grépon. But conversely, compared to the first two, who were completely obsessed by the mountain they had decided to climb, Mummery did not give a hoot about the Grépon. What matters to him is not the mountain as such, but the difficulty of its ascent. The nuance, subtle but fundamental, will bury definitively the Golden Age and allow climbers to enter a new era, 'acrobatic alpinism', which is practised on rocky walls where calves and forearms are severely tested, as for example in the Mummery crack on the Grépon. A true symbol. And if the Chamoniard was not sufficiently unhinged after that, a few years later Mummery decides that he does not need anyone anymore to climb mountains and that the English toff who follows his guide like a little dog is a dead loss. A few deeds on the Grand Charmoz, the Dent du Requin or the Brenva, and here comes a new revolutionary concept signed Al-Fred: 'alpinism without a guide'.

What a man! What a time!

24 August 1895

Albert Frederick Mummery disappears on Nanga Parbat. Having invented acrobatic alpinism, explored the Caucasus and invented alpinism without a guide, Mummery is bored to tears. For him, time does not fly fast enough. But in June 1895, he crosses by chance the path of Marty McFly who, overwhelmed by this man so in advance of his time, agrees to lend him his DeLorean. Mummery adjusts the temporal convector to 2.21 gigawatts and flies away to Rawalpindi with the presumptuous intention of climbing Nanga Parbat, 20 years before his adventurers' colleagues will start envisaging the question. Norman Collie and Geoffrey Hastings, the two friends whom he has taken with him, have so much difficulty to follow him on the vertiginous and iced slopes that on 24 August, our adventurer of modern times decides to go without them to the summit. He was never seen again. He was probably blown away by an avalanche, unless he exploded in flight after taking off from the summit in a spaceship of his own invention.

12 June 1907

Tom Longstaff, Karbir Burkhote and the brothers Alexis and Henri Brochard offer themselves to the Trisul (7120m), first 7,000er to be climbed, and breaking the altitude record established 20 years before by the Swiss Zurbriggen on Aconcagua, who later fell into depression. There being no suicide to lament in the ranks of that superb team, scientists will not be able to establish a link between exposure to high altitude and neurasthenia. Some experiments will prove later that in case of a forced turnaround 50m from the summit, one must beware.

17 July 1909

New altitude record on Chogolisa. Disappointed not to have reached the summit of K2, the Duke of Abruzzi and his henchmen fall back on its neighbour Chogolisa, where they reach 7,500 metres, breaking the Trisul

record. Bad weather forces them back 150m from the summit, but they come back to Italy with important information: from 7,500 metres onwards, men stop showing off.

28 July 1911

The Austrian Paul Preuss climbs the east face of the Campanile Basso in the Dolomites solo, without a rope and pegs. Preuss had a theory: 'a pitch must not be climbed if it cannot be climbed down without any aid.' In other words, abseiling is cheating. That gives a strong impression of his vision of climbing. If he had lived in the days of Himalayan conquests, Preuss would probably have been against wearing gloves. All the same, the east face of the Campanile Basso is grade V and at the time the event made quite some noise in Alpine circles. 'You are mad!' he was told by his rival and friend Tita Piazz, who himself did not hesitate to use a rope. 'Pegging is evil,' responded the Austrian, who managed to survive until October 1913 and a fall of 300m from the north face of Mandkogel. As for Tita Piazz, he died 35 years later falling off his bicycle.

22 December 1919

First general meeting of the Groupe de Haute Montagne created at the initiative of Jacques de Lepiney and Paul Chevalier, two members of the Parisian climber's tribe who in winter use the Fontainebleau boulders to train and invade the Alps in the summer months. At the end of the Great War, two notions still create conflict among French alpinists. The old school lauds the grandeur of conquest in alpinism or a scientific aim, while the new one, flabbergasted by the deeds of Zsigmondy and Mummery, has but one yearning: climb like mad up the wildest walls. The GHM, wishing 'to gather the upholders of an alpinism of excellence' declares independence and rapidly gathers the world elite of alpinism. Besides its mythical magazine, *Les Annales de Alpinisme*, the GHM initiate the first guidebooks such as the *Guide Vallot* and also and above all the first French Himalayan expeditions. Now be worried, *messieurs les Anglais*, the French rooster has put his crampons on!

24 September 1921

During the first reconnaissance expedition to Everest organised and financed by the brand-new Mount Everest Committee, the British reach the north col and are officially the first to put a foot on the highest mountain in the world. In that familiar 'I-will-not-be-at-peace-with-myself-until-I-have-climbed-this-bloody-mountain' sequence, please welcome George Mallory.