

# WHEN THE ALPS CAST THEIR SPELL

*Mountaineers of the Alpine Golden Age*



TREVOR BRAHAM

At 82 years of age, Trevor Braham no longer climbs but has reached a new summit with an award-winning book on mountaineering's golden age. *When the Alps Cast Their Spell* has won the prestigious Boardman-Tasker prize for mountain literature.

'They don't cast the same spell anymore,' says Braham, who has lived in Switzerland for the past 30 years. 'They don't raise the same passion as they used to in those [Victorian] days.'

Braham is talking about the reason he wrote his book as we walk along a snow-dusted ridge below the peaks of the Eiger, Mönch and Jungfrau. We have come up by train from the resort of Grindelwald, as hundreds of thousands of tourists do every year. He says it is the ease with which people can travel in the Alps today that makes them take the mountains for granted.

Braham's book turns back the hands of time in order to explain the attraction for the Victorians of the 19th century. But I want to know why a man who grew up at the foot of the Himalayas and took part in many pioneering expeditions in the world's highest range would devote a book to the Alps.

'I was very conscious of the fact that the golden age really represented the birth of mountaineering,' he explains. 'The people who began it, I always looked on them as a heroic group of men,' said Braham. 'I was fascinated with them, then I began to read their books and learn more about them and this is what led me on.'

He says his fascination with mountains began as a schoolboy at a Jesuit school in the Indian hill station of Darjeeling. 'One of my most poignant memories was looking through a telescope at the south face of Kangchenjunga and seeing the wind driving snow across that face,' he recounts. 'Waking up in the morning seeing that face again, I wondered what it would be like to have a camp up there.'

He got his chance in 1954 as a member of a reconnaissance expedition that paved the way for the first successful ascent of Kangchenjunga, the world's third highest peak, a year later.

A few years earlier, in 1947, he was invited to join a Swiss expedition which claimed many first ascents including Kedarnath in the Garhwal Himalaya. This was the start of a friendship with Swiss mountaineers, which led Braham to Switzerland the following year to climb in the Alps. He hired a guide for the entire climbing season, as had been the practice among Victorians a century earlier, and followed some of the routes of the men he has now written about.

'There was one particular section of the ridge below the Monte Rosa summit which Tyndall describes in great detail,' Braham says about the passage in his book dedicated to scientist John Tyndall, who made the first solo ascent of Monte Rosa in 1858. As Braham says in the book: 'He seems to have embarked on this venture in a strangely rash and overconfident mood, driven not by any scientific curiosity but by: "the unspeakable beauty of the morning which filled him with a longing to see the world from the top of Monte Rosa".'

'He had a fright there as he ought to have,' Braham says referring back to his own experience on the mountain. 'He could have killed himself on the narrow and tricky part of the upper ridge. I was roped [to a guide], he wasn't.'

Braham captures the spirit of the alpine golden age by focussing on the characters

as much as the exploits of men like Tyndall, Leslie Stephen and Edward Whymper. The author quotes Stephen recalling ‘with something like a sense of shame, how on one of the loftiest peaks of Switzerland I spent the precious moments [on the summit] in having my trousers mended by a guide, who happened to be also a tailor’.

‘They saw the funny side of it all and [I wanted] to show that they were just ordinary people,’ Braham says. ‘They reacted as you or I would react.’

As we make the first tracks in fresh snow with the mountains towering above us, Braham points below, where the railway line disappears around a corner to a place called Wengernalp.

‘In Leslie Stephen’s day, it was completely primitive. He regarded it as a sacred place,’ he says reverentially. ‘It was just at the foot of the Jungfrau and Mönch. The glaciers were much bigger in those days. For him, it represented the spirit of the high mountains, and this is what attracted a man like Leslie Stephen to the Alps.’

And men like Braham.

‘I come to the mountains because I love the mountains. They never fail to raise my spirits, even today.’

Dale Bechtel above Grindelwald for swissinfo, 16 November, 2004.

[http://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/Home/Archive/The\\_Alps\\_cast\\_their\\_spell.html?cid=1021150](http://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/Home/Archive/The_Alps_cast_their_spell.html?cid=1021150)

WHEN  
THE ALPS CAST  
THEIR SPELL

*Mountaineers of the Alpine Golden Age*

TREVOR BRAHAM



[www.theinpinn.co.uk](http://www.theinpinn.co.uk)

# CONTENTS

Acknowledgements

Preface

PART ONE: 12<sup>TH</sup>-18<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

Ch 1 Beginnings

PART TWO: 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY LEADING MOUNTAINEERS

Ch 2 Alfred Wills

Ch 3 John Tyndall

Ch 4 Leslie Stephen

Ch 5 Adolphus Warburton Moore

Ch 6 Edward Whymper

Ch 7 Albert Frederick Mummery

Ch 8 An Unexpected Success

Ch 9 There Were Many Others

    Leading Ladies

    Eminent Europeans

    Great Guides

PART THREE: 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

Ch 10 Beyond the Beginnings

Notes to Chapters

Alpine First Ascents

Bibliography

Index

About the Author

Copyright Page

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Royal Society, Edinburgh.

The Royal Institution, London.

Scott Polar Research Institute, Cambridge.

Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies, Banff.

John Wills for information and photographs from family archives.

Alpine Museum, Bern (courtesy of Director, Urs Kneubühl).

Club Alpin Français, Paris (courtesy of Dominique Simon).

Alpine Museum, Chamonix.

Heimatvereinigung, Grindelwald (courtesy of Samuel Michel).

Zentralbibliothek & Schweizer Alpen Club bibliothek, Zürich.

Bibliothèque Cantonale et Universitaire, Lausanne.

Musée Historique et Archives Communale, Lausanne.

Bundesamt für Landestopographie, Wabern.

Schweiz Tourismus, Zürich.

Aargauer Kunsthaus, Aarau.

Rotten Verlag, Brig.

Gutenberg Verlag, Zürich.

Frau Gozon-Amstutz for use of her late father's publications.

The late André Roch and Albert Eggler for historical guidance.

For use of illustrations, I am grateful to Rudolf Würzer (Linz), Martin

Moran, Roger Mear, Roy Ruddle and Erhard Loretan.

## PREFACE

An eminent eighteenth-century Bernese savant, Albrecht von Haller, expressed in poetic language the feebleness of the human mind to absorb the magnificence of mountains. For the early mountaineers, captivated by their mystical quality, the mountains cast a spell, arousing a challenge of adventure in a unique world. With today's crowding of once secluded places, some of the original enchantment appears to have diminished; and there have been radical changes in attitudes and practices. Amidst this transformation it is interesting to pry into the past for a closer glimpse of the pioneer mountaineers – particularly of those visitors from Victorian Britain who travelled out to the Alps where they introduced the new 'sport' of mountain climbing. Much has been written about them already, resulting in their activities having been judged fairly or unfairly based on past perceptions. It is perhaps a suitable time to look back at their conception of the mountain world, and to re-appraise the activities of some of the main actors during the period that the British labelled the Alpine Golden Age.

Unravelling of mysteries surrounding the origins of the Alps appealed strongly to the pioneer explorers, but the motives of later visitors from Britain were different. Leslie Stephen's definition would still seem fairly accurate for a majority of mountaineers: 'Mountaineering, in my sense of the word, is a sport which brings one into contact with the sublimest aspects of nature; and without setting their enjoyment before one as an ultimate end or aim, helps one to absorb and be penetrated by their influence. Still, it is a sport – and I have no wish to place it on a different footing'.

By the mid-nineteenth century interest in the new sport had been sufficiently aroused in Britain for the formation of a club in London. But the Alpine Club was barely eight years old when disaster struck after the deaths in 1865 of three British climbers and a leading French guide on the Matterhorn. The shock aroused by that event cast obloquy on the Club's *raison d'être*, threatening to set a ban on its activities. That the censorious attitudes to which the Club was then exposed were firmly resisted, is testimony to the commitment of a small group of amateur climbers for whom there was no turning back.

To pre-empt any censure concerning the limited range of my main actors, appearing in chronological order, I must add that I have emulated a principle favoured by Lytton Stachey in one of his biographical works: 'My choice of persons has been determined by no desire to construct a system or to prove a theory ... and it has been my purpose to illustrate rather than to explain'. If the names of other eminent pioneers appear only briefly, it is not because their contribution to the 'unveiling of the Alps' has been in any way less notable. It has been my aim, within a modest canvas, to illustrate the atmosphere of those far-off days, when every venture aroused a sense of wonder; and I have allowed the characters to speak for themselves, accurately recording facts, and

seeking to avoid gratuitous opinions.

The writing of this book would not have been possible without the help that I have received from Bob Lawford, Librarian Emeritus of the Alpine Club London, who gave me unlimited access to the Club's valuable library and archives, which constitute the most complete source in the world of primary information about the Alpine Golden Age. I would like also to express my gratitude to several other sources and individuals – too numerous to mention – who have provided me so willingly with the benefit of their advice and assistance; and to apologise in advance if I have omitted to name them individually. I cannot conclude without conveying my appreciation of the support of my editors, Kate Blackadder and Sallie Moffat, for gently upbraiding me about inexactitudes and inconsistencies in my text, of which my enthusiasm for the subject left me oblivious.

PART ONE  
12<sup>TH</sup>-18<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

## CHAPTER ONE

### BEGINNINGS

Up there in the sky, to which only the clouds belong and birds and the last trembling colours of pure light, they stood fast and hard; not moving as do the things of the sky They were as distant as the little upper clouds of the summer, as fine and tenuous; but in their reflection and in their quality as it were of weapons (like spears and shields of an unknown array) they occupied the sky with a sublime invasion: and the things proper to the sky were forgotten by me in their presence as I gazed. ... Since I could now see such a wonder, and it could work such things in my mind, therefore some day I should be part of it. That is what I felt. That is also which leads some men to climb mountain-tops.

Hilaire Belloc: on first viewing the Alps  
from the Weissenstein (Jura), 1901

The developments that began to accelerate in the European Alps, culminating in the alpine Golden Age in the mid nineteenth century, were preceded by events less spectacular, but illustrating the existence of a spirit of keen enterprise long before the Alps became a playground for mountain climbers. During earlier ages the high mountains reflected aspects of terror as dwelling-places of the supernatural, while the hazards of approaching precipitous regions of rock and ice acted as a powerful barrier to access. The motives of the earliest explorers were different from those of today's mountaineers, but the challenges that they faced and overcame were no less intimidating.

The impressions of an English monk, John de Bremble, while crossing the Grand St Bernard pass in February 1188, typify the current of thought that prevailed among travellers in his day. 'Feeling myself so much nearer heaven that I was more sure that my prayer would be heard, I said "Lord, restore me to my brethren, that I may tell them that they come not to this place of torment".' That pass, which has been, and remains, one of the great thoroughfares across the Alps is believed to have been frequented prior to the Roman era. The first hospice was set up on its summit in 859AD, and was substantially rebuilt two hundred years later. The St Gotthard pass was of important use to the Romans, uniting the two portions of their province of Raetia, now embracing the cantons of Valais and Grisons. The Théodule pass, named according to legend after St Théodule, the first Bishop of Valais, from 381-391AD, flourished as a strategic route connecting the Rhône and Aosta valleys during a particularly mild climatic period in Europe between the tenth and sixteenth centuries, when the retreat of glaciers left the pass free of snow providing easy access to it for traders and feudal overlords with their horse and mule caravans. A major climatic change, described as the Little Ice Age, took place between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with the expansion of glaciers when the crossing of the pass involved a 'march on ice for a good eight miles'.<sup>1</sup> Apart from erratic spells of advance and retreat a general period of glacier-melt began by the mid nineteenth century and has continued ever since. (Note 1, see Notes to Chapters). The Alpine passes

stretching across the southern borders of Switzerland retain their crucial importance as connecting links between northern and southern Europe, but serious environmental and social problems caused by the near-saturation of commercial and tourist road traffic have advanced research into major projects for the design and construction of underground railway routes.

#### EARLY TRAVELLERS

One of the earliest alpine travellers was the historian Aegidius Tschudi of Glarus (1505-72) who, between 1524-28, crossed several passes above the snowline, publishing in 1538 detailed accounts of his journeys illustrated with maps. His contemporary Josias Simmler (1530-76), professor of mathematics and history in Zürich, published in 1574 *De Alpibus Commentarius* which provided a good deal of practical advice for travel above the snowline, revealing surprisingly detailed knowledge about the use of alpenstock, climbing-irons, snow-shoes, dark glasses and rope. The English diarist and writer John Evelyn travelled from Italy across the Simplon pass on 16 May 1646 at the age of twenty-six when he encountered many difficulties, including freezing temperatures and snow. Reaching Switzerland, he recorded: 'The People ... rustikly clad, ... for the most part in blew cloth nor with almost any distinction twixt the gentleman and common sort, being exceedingly frugal: so as not one beggar amongst them: add to this their great honesty and fidelity, though exacting enough for what they part with. Every man gos with a sword by his side, and the whole country well disciplined and indeed impregnable which made the Romans have so little success against them.' (Note 2). During the early history of Switzerland it has been said that Swiss peasants governed themselves in the 'democratic' cantons, and were well governed in the 'aristocratic' ones.

#### SCHOLARS AND SCIENTISTS

Three eminent Swiss scholars who pioneered serious scientific investigations into the origins of the Alps were Johann-Jakob Scheuchzer of Zürich (1672-1733), Albrecht von Haller of Bern (1708-77), and Horace-Bénédict de Saussure of Geneva (1740-99). Scheuchzer, a professor of mathematics, physics, and natural science, was probably the first to undertake glaciological observations, carrying out nine exploratory journeys between 1702-11. His four-volume work, *Naturgeschichten des Schweizerlandes* published 1716-18, which included four map-sheets covering the whole of Switzerland, was dedicated to the Royal Society in London of which he was a Fellow. Haller, a specialist in natural sciences and a doctor of medicine, began his thirty-five-year involvement with the Alps at the age of twenty. He published works on botany, philosophy and theology; also a famous poem *Die Alpen*, a spare-time occupation of his youth, which earned him the title of 'the poet of the Alps'. (Note 3) Haller was elected to Fellowship of the Royal Society, and his work had a profound influence upon his successors. De Saussure, came from a noble family of scholars and intellectuals which had emigrated from Lorraine in the sixteenth century. He was a keen botanist, naturalist, geologist, and professor of natural philosophy at Geneva. At the age of twenty he began a long series of scientific travels in the mountains, for which he had developed a passion from early childhood, with a journey on foot from Geneva to Chamonix. He was fascinated by La montagne Maudite, as Mont Blanc was

originally known, offering a monetary reward to anyone who succeeded in reaching its summit.

For thirty years, de Saussure's investigations led him through fourteen crossings of the main alpine chain by eight different passes, in addition to 16 other excursions to central parts of the chain. (Note 4) In 1788, he had a stone hut built on the col du Géant (3359m) first crossed by surveyors the year before, where he spent sixteen days with his son meticulously carrying out a series of geological and meteorological observations. His heroic efforts were not appreciated by his guides who apparently felt that enough was enough and destroyed his provisions, ensuring his return to the valley. In 1789 de Saussure visited Macugnaga in order to measure the height of Monte Rosa. In 1792 he camped for three days on the Théodule pass studying the Matterhorn and measuring its height. In 1787 de Saussure achieved his personal ambition when he climbed Mont Blanc, his motives being principally scientific. (Note 5) He is regarded as one of the founders of modern geology, and his monumental four-volume work *Voyages dans Les Alpes*, published 1779-96 combines geological observations with essays on natural science and mountain travel.<sup>2</sup>

#### ARTISTS

The Swiss painter Kaspar Wolf of Aargau (1753-98) was the first major interpreter of the alpine scene. He recognised the overpowering nature of this medium for giving expression to the grandeur of high mountains. His output includes over 150 oil paintings, which provide images of peaks and glaciers in their pristine isolation over 230 years ago. He was followed by Alexandre Calame (1810-64) of Vevey distinguished for his magnificent portraiture of the Bernese Alps. JMW Turner (1775-1851) made six visits to Switzerland between 1802-44, painting over a hundred alpine watercolours. His impressionistic visions, acclaimed as the work of genius after his death, did not meet with universal appreciation during his lifetime. One of his great protagonists was John Ruskin, himself an artist and romantic worshipper of mountains, who referred to the Alps as 'the cathedrals of the earth'. First taken there by his parents at the age of thirteen, Ruskin's subsequent visits developed into an almost annual pilgrimage. On his last visit, he wrote at Chamonix: 'The only days I can look back to as rightly and wisely in entirety spent, have been in sight of Mont Blanc, Monte Rosa and the Jungfrau'. The English lakeland poet William Wordsworth, at the age of twenty, spent most of his long vacation from Cambridge visiting the Alps, writing from Switzerland 'We are now upon the point of quitting these most sublime and beautiful parts; and you cannot imagine the melancholy regret which I feel at the idea'. (Note 6)

#### SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

By the end of the eighteenth century curiosity was aroused by the unexplained presence of erratic blocks of massive proportions such as the *Pierre à Bot*, above the lake of Neuchâtel, the *blaue Stein* at Mattmark lake above Saas, and the *Pierre du Niton* on the bed of the lake at Geneva which raises its head close to today's familiar *jet d'eau*. (Note 7) In attempting to explain their presence, a number of theories were put forward. James Hutton, in his book *Theory of the Earth* published in Edinburgh in

1785, stated his belief that glaciers were the vehicles which carried erratic blocks into the valleys. Hutton's work was popularised by the Scottish scientist, John Playfair in his publication, *Illustrations of the Huttonian Theory of the Earth* published in 1802. A leading researcher during this period was Professor Franz Joseph Hugi (1796-1855) geologist, botanist, and professor of natural science at Solothurn, who carried out geological studies between 1827-30 from a cabin built on the lower Aar glacier, publishing in 1830 the result of his investigations in his book *Naturhistorische Alpenreise* (A Naturalist's Journey Across the Alps). Others were Jean de Charpentier (b1786) responsible for setting up the salt mines in Bex, whose publication in 1841, *Essai sur les Glaciers*, laid sound practical foundations to knowledge about the Ice Age; also Canon Rendu of Chambéry who introduced some important glaciological theories. A series of studies from a base on the Aar glacier was carried out by Louis Agassiz (b1807) a leading Swiss scholar and doctor of philosophy at Neuchâtel. He was assisted by Edouard Désor, born in Germany in 1811, who later published several scientific papers on the Alps, and was made an honorary citizen of Neuchâtel. In 1841 Professor James David Forbes of Edinburgh was invited to visit them. (Note 8) The following year Forbes undertook an exploratory journey in the Valais accompanying the Bernese scientist Bernhard Rudolf Studer (b1794), who was responsible for important work on the geography of Switzerland during twenty years of research and travel. Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, born in Paris in 1814, gained wide fame as an artist, geologist and architect. He was responsible for restoration of the thirteenth-century Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris and of the medieval city of Carcassonne, spending the last years of his life in Lausanne where he carried out restoration of the thirteenth-century cathedral, designed the Scottish Church, and the villa in which he lived; he died there in 1879. He spent the summers of 1868-75 in the Mont Blanc region where he was engaged in geophysical, geological and glaciological studies, besides producing a map of the massif. A genuine mountain lover, he was an original member of the Club Alpin Français. Over 125 years ago he was perhaps the first serious observer of mountain ecology with a clear perception of the natural laws that govern the environment. He sounded sharp warnings about the consequences resulting from failure to observe those laws by thoughtless exploitation of the resources of mountain regions – warnings which continue to be ignored, resulting in the increasing disappearance of wilderness areas. His book *Le massif du Mont Blanc*, was published in Paris in 1876. (Note 9) Present concern about the mountain environment is at best ambivalent, with growing misuse of resources generated by human and economic demands. A statement made recently by a university researcher in the USA, 'Mother Nature has a way of working against us', represents the sort of muddled thinking that occurs in sections of society which ought to know better.

#### EARLY MOUNTAINEERS

The Italian poet Petrarch (1304-74), achieving a long-cherished ambition, may have been the first to record, in a letter to his brother, sentiments of joy after his ascent of Mont Ventoux (1912m) in the Vaucluse on 26 April 1336, a mountain believed to have been climbed by shepherds in 1286.<sup>3</sup> On 1 September 1358 the pilgrim Rotario d'Asti climbed Rochemelon (3538m) near Susa, placing a bronze Madonna in a grotto below the top; a chapel was founded there, which has become the object of a summer

pilgrimage. An artillery officer, Antoine de Ville, Seigneur of Domp Julien and Beaupré and chamberlain to Charles VIII of France, was the first to record the use of mechanical aids when ascending Mont Aiguille (2086m) in the Vercors on 26 June 1492. Ten men scaled the cliffs employing warlike equipment designed to scale city walls, including ladders, ropes, pegs, hammers and stirrups. They spent three days on the meadow-like summit in order to establish convincing proof of their ascent. The second ascent of Mont Aiguille was made 342 years later by Jean Liotard, a local shepherd. Konrad Gesner (1516-65), doctor of medicine in Basel and of science in Zürich, expressed the true mountaineering spirit when he wrote to a friend in 1541: 'The soul is strangely rapt with these astonishing heights ... the abruptly soaring summits, the trackless steeps, the vast slopes rising to the sky, the rugged rocks, the shady woods.'<sup>4</sup>

The glaciers of Grindelwald had begun to attract travellers during the seventeenth century; but Chamonix, where a Bénédictine priory is known to have existed as early as the eleventh century, was not discovered as a goal for tourists until 1741 when William Windham of Felbrigg Hall, Norfolk, aged twenty-three, one of a group of young Englishmen studying in Geneva, and Dr Richard Pococke who had just completed an extensive study-tour of the Middle East, organised a journey to Chamonix with six others. They set out on 19 June along the wilderness of the Arve valley, carrying firearms as a precaution against possible attack by brigands. Travelling on foot they reached Chamonix after three days where they engaged a group of hunters as guides and porters. On 22 June: After climbing with great labour for four hours and three-quarters we got to the top of the mountain (Montenvers)<sup>5</sup>. It is impossible to give you a proper idea of what we saw from there because I know of nothing that bears the slightest resemblance to it.' Descending the steep and loose moraine slope with difficulty, Windham and Pococke's party reached the ice of the glacier, becoming the first tourists to set foot on the Mer de Glace where they spent half an hour. Laboriously re-ascending the moraine they had a short rest before returning to Chamonix at sunset. A granite boulder, where they are believed to have rested became known as *La Pierre des Anglais*. The stone seen today, near the pathway below the Montenvers cable-car station, inscribed 'Pococke et Windham 1741', is probably a replacement of the original 'ancient grey stone' which, it is believed, was damaged or destroyed. Although very few tourists are now aware of the stone's existence, the attention of the world at large was attracted to the unique features of the Chamonix valley and its glaciers by the account published shortly after Windham and Pococke's visit. It was nineteen years later that de Saussure visited Chamonix, and forty-five years were to pass before Mont Blanc was climbed.

The De Luc brothers of Geneva, who climbed the Brévent in 1754, ascended Mont Buet (3094m) in 1770. The elder brother, Jean-André, a geologist, meteorologist, and inventor of the hygrometer, was elected to Fellowship of the Royal Society and settled in England in 1772, where he died aged ninety. Mont Vêlan (3731m) was climbed on 31 August 1779 by Abbé Laurent-Joseph Murith, prior of St Bernard hospice, with 'two hardy hunters', Moret and Genoud, only the latter accompanying him to the top; this was probably the hardest mountain ascent made at the time. Murith was a keen botanist, whose work *Guide de Botaniste* was published in 1810; a few days after his

ascent he wrote to a fellow-botanist, de Saussure: 'I had too much difficulty, despite my hardihood, to gain this icy colossus'. He appears to have undertaken the climb purely as a sporting challenge. In 1784 JM Clement reached the main summit of the Dents du Midi (3257m) whose peaks dominate the village of Val d'Illeiez, of which he was vicar; a keen naturalist, he possessed the richest library in the Valais, comprising over eight hundred volumes relating to natural history and languages. The explorations and climbs of Placidus à Spescha (b1752), a Bénédictine monk of Disentis, entitle him to a firm place among the early pioneers; T Graham Brown has described him as 'perhaps the first of the true mountaineers'. He loved both mountains and mountaineering, and took a keen interest in geography and geology. Between 1788-1824, he is credited with having made more than thirty mountain ascents, including the Rheinwaldhorn (3402m), Oberalpstock (3328m), Güferhorn (3383m), Piz Urlaun (3359m), Stockgrond (3422m), crossing a pass to its north which bears his name Porta da Spescha (3352m). At the age of seventy-two, he took part in the first ascent of the Tödi (3620m). A shrewd judge of men, he is reported to have remarked: 'In the choice of companion for a mountain expedition one cannot be too particular.' Spescha appears to have suffered a chequered fate: his monastery, said to have been founded in 614AD, was plundered and burnt, together with its valuable archives, by French troops during the military aggression following the Revolution; and, for a time, he was held prisoner by Austrian invaders. Something of an eccentric, he ended his days aged eighty-one as chaplain of his monastery.

The forerunners of the eighteenth century were the stage-setters for mountaineers at the start of the nineteenth century; who, in turn, inspired an interest that encouraged the arrival in the second half of that century of expanding numbers of tourists and mountain-climbers. The exploits of the latter encompass the history of the 'Golden Age' of alpinism.

#### TOPOGRAPHERS

The first complete map of Switzerland, stretching from the region of Mont Blanc to Lake Constance, comprising sixteen sheets on a scale of 1:108000, appeared between 1786-97, having been commissioned by an Aarau industrialist and politician Johann-Rudolf Meyer (1739-1813). During the fieldwork, which was carried out principally by Heinrich Weiss, an engineer and topographer from Strasbourg, assisted by Joachim Müller of Engelberg, several mountains were climbed, Meyer himself joining his surveyors on a few climbs including the third ascent of Titlis. In 1833 General Guillaume-Henri Dufour (1787-1875) Swiss soldier, statesman, and engineer, was appointed as head of the newly-formed Bureau Topographique in Geneva. (Note 10) Under his direction, between 1845-64, twenty-five copper-engraved sheets, which included twelve of the Alps, on the scale of 1:100000, were produced covering the whole of Switzerland. General Dufour was succeeded in 1865 by Col Hermann Siegfried (1819-79) who set the standards for the excellent Swiss maps that are published today. The Siegfried maps comprised 604 sheets, of which the alpine regions appeared on a scale of 1:50000. They continued to be published up to 1926, and remained in print until 1952.

#### MONT BLANC (4807 M) AND MONTE ROSA(4634M)

Seven years before Mont Blanc was first climbed, an Englishman Thomas Bowdler, aged twenty-five, offered the princely sum of five guineas to the guides of Chamonix if they succeeded in finding a way to the summit. After the first ascent made by Dr Michel-Gabriel Paccard with Jacques Balmat on 8 August 1786, a second ascent was made on 5 July 1787 by three Chamonix men, Jean-Michel Cachat, Alexis Tournier, and Jacques Balmat. De Saussure made the third ascent on 3 August of the same year; and, six days later, a twenty-three year-old Englishman Mark Beaufoy made a fourth ascent, dressed in white ‘... that the sunbeams might be thrown off ... besides a pole for walking I carried with me Cramp Irons for the heels of my shoes ... a long rope, a hatchet, and a ladder’. Jean-Michel Cachat was his leading guide. Twenty-five years after the first ascent only ten parties had reached the summit. (Note 11) At the start of the Golden Age in 1854, the number of ascents had increased to forty-five. Nine years later an Englishman, Frederick Morshead, made a solo ascent in a single day. The first winter ascent was made in January 1876 by an Englishwoman, Miss Straton, accompanied by the guides, Jean Charlet, Sylvain Couttet, and Michel Balmat.

Ascents of the nine summits between 4046m and 4634m forming the Monte Rosa group were spread over a period of forty-four years. In 1819 and 1820 Joseph Zumstein and Johann Vincent from Gressoney climbed the Zumsteinspitze (4563m) and the Vincent Pyramid (4215m). Other peaks climbed were the Ludwigshöhe (4342m) in 1822 by Ludwig von Welden, an Austrian staff officer and the Signalkuppe (Pta Gnifetti) (4554m) in 1842 by G Gnifetti, a parish priest of Gressoney, with a party from Alagna.<sup>6</sup> The Grenzgifel (4596m) was climbed in 1848 by Victor Puiseaux, and Dr Ordinaire, from Besançon. (Note 12) In 1855, 1861, and 1863 respectively three other main peaks of the group were reached by British climbers with their guides, the Dufourspitze (4634m), the highest peak in Switzerland, followed by the Nordend 4609m and the Parrotspitze 4432m. (Note 13)

#### MOUNTAIN ASCENTS (1800-50)

Mountaineering in Austria began over two hundred years ago with the ascent in 1800 of the highest peak of the Gross Glockner (3796m) by the brothers J and M Klotz, carpenters of Heiligenblut, who were members of an expedition promoted by Count Franz von Salm, Bishop of Gurk. In 1802, the physicist Ramond de Carbonnière (1755-1827), a pioneer of Pyrenean climbing, took part in the ascent of Mont Perdu (3355m); his guides, Laurens and Rondo, reaching the summit. In 1804 Josef Pichler, a chamois hunter from the Passeiertal, with two Zillerthaler, climbed the highest peak (3905m) of the Ortler group. The first to climb a Swiss mountain above 4000m were two brothers of the Meyer family of Aarau, sponsors of the first Swiss maps, and outstanding among the Swiss pioneers of mountaineering. Johann-Rudolf II and Hieronymus, with two chamois hunters, Alois Volker and Josef Bortis, reached the north summit of the Jungfrau (4089m) on 3 August 1811; and on 8 August 1812 the south summit of the mountain (4158m) was reached by Gottlieb, 19-year-old son of J-R Meyer II. In 1813, a French traveller Henri Maynard, accompanied by J-M Couttet of Chamonix, made the first ascent of the Zermatt Breithorn (4165m). On 10 August 1829 the Finsteraarhorn (4274m) was climbed by two guides accompanying the geologist Professor Hugi, who himself stopped short of the summit. Hugi, who

reached the Strahlegg pass on 14 January 1832, became the first climber to accomplish an alpine winter ascent. Edouard D sor (Note 14), working with Louis Agassiz on the Aar glacier, climbed the Lauteraarhorn (4042m) in 1842, the Dossenhorn (3138m) in 1843, the Rosenhorn (3689m) in 1844 (Note 15), and the Galenstock (3583m) in 1845. During cartographic surveys connected with the Dufour maps, Johann Wilhelm Coaz of Chur climbed Piz Bernina (4049m) on 13 September 1850 accompanied by two brothers from the Grisons, Jon and Lorenz Tscharnner. Coaz is credited with having made over thirty other ascents between the years 1845-50, including Piz Tchierva (3546m), Corvatsch (3451m), Kesch (3418m), Chap tschin (3386m) and Misaun (3249m). (Note 16) In the Austrian Alps, probably the first Tyrolean to climb out of a genuine love of mountains was Peter Carl Thurwieser (1789-1865) who is reported to have made seventy ascents including three first ascents during the years 1820-47.

#### PROMINENT SWISS MOUNTAINEERS

Edmund von Fellenberg of Bern (b1838) carried out a series of topographical expeditions in the Alps between 1856-83 which included first ascents of the Fiescherhorn (4048m), the first traverse of the Bietschhorn, and the second ascent (the first by the south-east ridge) of the Schreckhorn. Gottlieb Studer of Bern (1804-90), was a prodigious Alpine explorer whose campaigns commencing in 1823 extended for sixty years, and included 643 separate expeditions. Among his first ascents were the Studerhorn (3638m), which bears his name, the Gross Wannenhorn (3905m), Monte Leone (3553m), Sustenhorn (3503m) and Diablerets (3210m). His fame rests in his four-volume work *Uber Eis und Schnee* published between 1869-83, and in his output of engravings with over seven hundred Alpine panoramas. He was one of the founders of the Swiss Alpine Club (SAC), and in 1859 he became the first foreigner to be elected to honorary membership of the Alpine Club London. An active Swiss climber of the period was JJ Weilenmann (1819-96) of St Gallen, who is reputed to have climbed three hundred and twenty mountains in twenty years. He made the second ascents of the Dufourspitze in 1855, and of Monte Leone (solo) in 1859; and carried out a number of solitary climbs in the Oetzal Alps. On 11 September 1865 he made the first ascent of Mont Blanc de Cheilon (3870m). His climbs are recorded in a three-volume work *Aus der Firnenwelt* published in Leipzig 1872-77.

#### DEVELOPMENT OF TOURISM IN SWITZERLAND

Mountains, often the setting for major Biblical events, have exercised a powerful spiritual influence as symbols of supernatural power. They are universally revered by religious pilgrims supported by strong beliefs, who face unknown challenges in order to approach distant shrines; instincts that still prevail in many parts of the world. Indian pilgrims travel in thousands to the sources of holy rivers in the Himalaya; as Japanese pilgrims visit the shrine on top of Fujiyama. By the middle of the nineteenth century the importance of scientific research, which had provided the initial motive for alpine exploration, began to be displaced by the realisation that the beauty of the alps presented an almost untouched potential for tourism. The main alpine passes had become generally accessible to wheeled traffic, when new carriage-roads were opened across the Simplon in 1800-05, the Susten in 1811, and the St Gotthard in 1820-30, although until 1850 horse-drawn carriages faced steep descents not without danger,

and were fitted with heavy wooden logs as 'drags'. Switzerland entered the railway age in August 1847 when the first rail-link was inaugurated between Zürich and Baden. The expansion of the system was among the key elements leading to the opening up of the alpine wonderland, accompanied by a rapid response to the needs of tourists with the construction between 1845-80 of a thousand new inns and hotels, one-third of which were situated above 1000m.

With the establishment of the Swiss Federal Constitution in 1848 the country introduced a national currency, a nationwide postal service, and the unification of weights and measures.<sup>7</sup> Swiss textile and watch industries had begun to flourish. Travel had become less tedious and difficult, the country was no longer an unknown or forbidding land. Mr Thomas Cook conducted his first alpine tour in 1863, which included Geneva and the Mont Blanc area; its success encouraged him to extend his visits in 1864 to Interlaken, Kandersteg and the Gemmi pass; thereafter the scale and popularity of Cook's annual tours gathered increasing pace. Three or four decades earlier, apart from scientists and artists, travellers had been limited to the wealthy upper classes carrying out a 'Grand Tour' of Europe. By 1868, when Queen Victoria rented a villa in Lucerne, visiting the Rigi, Pilatus and the Rhône glacier, tourism in Switzerland had taken a firm hold. The economic prosperity which had grown out of the industrial revolution in Great Britain created a growing class eager to escape from the narrowness of Victorian society to the splendours of the Swiss Alps. Most went there as curious travellers, but there was a small minority who, adapting readily to a different form of adventure which the mountains seemed to provide, evolved into a group of enthusiastic amateurs, forming the nucleus of the early British mountaineers.

Prior to 1854, occasional mountain ascents carried out in the course of scientific exploration were not generally recorded. Those who entered the field later made it perfectly clear by the manner and style of their activities that their interests were purely sporting. The magnificence of the setting cast the initial spell, but the new sport, demanding unusual physical and moral challenges, provided unique personal rewards. In its infancy the activity was ridiculed; not long after, it was roundly condemned as dangerous. The centenary volume of the *Alpine Journal* has recorded that: 'The first half of the 1860s may fairly be claimed to be the greatest period in Alpine history' To which it might be added that British climbers, accompanied by their Swiss, French, and Italian guides, played a dominant role in 'unveiling' the Alps and ascending its major peaks.

Interest in the alpine world was aroused in Britain by the publication in 1843 of a book by Professor JD Forbes describing his pioneer alpine journeys and glacier studies. Further stimulus was provided by an extravagant lecture-show which ran for over six years in London presented by Albert Smith, a congenial eccentric and gifted showman, who made the fortieth ascent of Mont Blanc in 1851. A few British amateurs had been visiting the Alps regularly by the mid 1840s. John Ball (1818-59), a man of private means, lawyer, politician, and botanist, began his series of visits to the Alps in 1840. Travelling through unfrequented regions for twenty-three years, he compiled valuable records which led to his editorship in 1859 of *Peaks, Passes, and Glaciers*, published by the Alpine Club London, and was followed by the appearance between 1863-68 of three volumes of his *Alpine Guide*, the forerunner of modern

guide-books, titled *The Western, Central and Eastern Alps*. Others prominent among the early British mountaineers were William Mathews, and members of his family, Edward Shirley Kennedy, Thomas George Bonney, Thomas Hinchcliff and Alfred Wills; they were the leaders of a group who spearheaded the formation of the first Alpine Club.

### THE ALPINE GOLDEN AGE

The British invasion of the Alps which began in the early 1850s spread swiftly over the next few decades. The men whose names fill the next five chapters of this book were among the leaders of the first wave of mountaineers. They belonged to a group whose ventures and achievements often overlapped: the Reverends Charles Hudson, Hereford Brooke George and James Robertson, members of the Walker family, the brothers Parker, Pendlebury, Pilkington and Smyth, Frank Gardiner, Francis Fox Tuckett, John Birkbeck, Florence Craufurd Grove, Charles Taylor, Reginald Macdonald, Thomas Stuart Kennedy, JJ Hornby, Reverend TH Philpott and several others, including some notable lady climbers. Their ventures fill the records of the early years. The Alpine Golden Age, so labelled by the English, which by vaguely defined tradition commenced with Alfred Wills' ascent of the Wetterhorn in 1854, opened a new era of sporting ascents of high peaks. It was followed a year later by the first ascent of Monte Rosa's highest summit by Charles Hudson, John Birkbeck, the Smyth brothers, and EJW Stevenson, and by the first guideless ascent of Mont Blanc by Charles Hudson's party. The 'eccentric' hobby developed into a new form of adventure, providing outdoor challenges and pleasures. During the first phase of the Golden Age, between the years 1854-65, thirty-six alpine summits above 4000m were reached for the first time, thirty-one of them by British parties, who were also largely involved in ascents of 120 other peaks, in addition to the crossings of new alpine passes during the same period. The measure of that achievement can be judged by comparison with the ascents of eight peaks above 4000m and 126 others during the preceding six hundred years.

The initial shock and horror aroused by the deaths of three British climbers and a French guide on the Matterhorn in 1865 briefly diminished, but did not end nor even halt, the expansion of alpine climbing. Fresh challenges were sought; new areas were discovered and developed, aspirations grew bolder, and mountaineering activities during the second phase of the Golden Age were no less impressive than those of the first. After the Matterhorn was climbed ([Note 17](#)) there remained other unclimbed peaks above 4000m, the Grandes Jorasses (Pointe Walker), the Grand Combin (Valsorey), the Lenzspitze, Mont Maudit, Aiguille de Rochefort, Les Droites, Aiguille du Géant, to name a few, apart from a wealth of challenging peaks above 3000m, while serious exploration of the Dolomites began only in 1870, and of the Dauphiné in 1873, providing rich opportunities for climbers who were active during the second phase between the years 1866-82. ([Note 18](#)) A new era began in 1882 with the adoption of mechanically-assisted climbing, when the Valtournanche guide Jean-Joseph Maquignaz hammered pitons into the rocks of the Aiguille du Géant and laid five hundred feet of rope between 26-29 July making the first ascent of the south-west summit with his employers, who were four young members of the Sella family. ([Note](#)

19) The use of mechanical aids was considered an aberration at the time.<sup>8</sup> Other mountaineers were successful without such aids, exploring difficult new routes on mountains which had been climbed. By the end of the nineteenth century the romantic age was over, and the way was open for new developments.

## ALPINE CLUBS

The first Alpine Club was inaugurated at a meeting held in London on 22 December 1857, with John Ball chosen as President. The list of original members included the names of twenty-nine men whose alpine knowledge or experience had qualified them to join, an indication of the narrowly limited numbers in the beginning who were attracted to mountaineering. By 1865 membership had expanded tenfold, and in 1881 the membership register contained 444 names. The Club published two volumes of *Peaks, Passes and Glaciers* in 1859 and 1862; a third followed in 1932. Volume 1 of the *Alpine Journal* was published in 1863. The next Alpine Club was the Oesterreichischer Alpenverein set up in Wien in 1862. On 19 April 1863 the Swiss Alpine Club held its inaugural meeting in Olten attended by thirty-five members, with Dr Rudolf Théodor Simler, professor of geology and chemistry at Bern university, elected as President; membership by the end of that year grew to 257, grouped together in eight sections. In 1863 the first mountain hut, the Grünhorn, was built by the Club at a cost of 876 francs; over the years 152 others have been added, and membership has reached 100,000 in 2003 covering 92 sections. The Club Alpino Italiano was inaugurated on 23 October 1863 as the Club Alpino Torino, adopting its present name in 1866. Two of the club's chief founders were the politician Quintino Sella, and the geologist Felice Giordano, both of whom were associated with organising the first ascent of the Matterhorn from Italy in 1865; the Club set up its first primitive bivouac on the mountain in 1867. The Deutscher Alpenverein was founded in München in 1869, and the Club Alpin Français in 1874. The European clubs, unlike the London club, which laid down standards of eligibility for membership, attracted vastly greater numbers enabling them to finance the construction of pathways and huts in the heart of the Alps. In 1876 Le Centro Excursionista de Catalunya was founded in Spain, and in 1878 the Oesterreichischen Alpenklub in Austria. They were followed by the Belgian, Swedish, New Zealand and Slovenian Clubs in 1883, 1885, 1891 and 1893. The Royal Netherland, and American Alpine Clubs were established in 1902, and the Alpine Club of Canada in 1906. André Roch, a leading Swiss climber during the mid-twentieth century, wrote about this development, 'Alpine Clubs began to be established in several countries, the die was cast, and alpinism was born in the congenial form introduced by the English.'

It is considered fashionable now to deride the Victorian age. Clinton Dent, Alpine Club President in 1887, referred to the experiences of the Alpine pioneers from Britain as 'simple and wholesome pleasures'. They were serious men in a serious age, though their alpine activities sometimes tended to label them as eccentric or, at the least, as rather foolish. Their literature has been described as 'facetious and flippant ... but always alive'. They were individuals seeking a new form of personal satisfaction – aesthetic, spiritual, physical – which the mountains provided. Adapting to hardships unknown today, they were amply compensated by the privileges that were their lot –