

The First Ascent of Mont Blanc, by T. Graham Brown and Sir Gavin de Beer, with foreword by Sir John Hunt. London: Oxford University Press, 1957. 490 pages; ill. Price 70s.

Published on the occasion of the Centenary of the Alpine Club, this is an expensive book, but a necessary luxury for those interested in Alpine history, particularly in the events relating to the attempts on Mont Blanc and the successful effort of 1786. The collaboration of a great expert on the mountain (author of *Brenva* and former editor of *AJ*) with a noted historical authority bespeaks the integrity of its content.

The attainment of Mont Blanc on August 8, 1786 broke the magic barrier defending the hitherto almost ignored world of snow. Not only the highest summit of the Alps, this peak became symbolic as the portal to mountain adventure; but its clouded history, particularly in connection with the controversy developing around Paccard and Balmat, fills many printed pages. Only in recent years has the truth become known and Paccard placed in his rightful position of honor. Whymper was the first to see this: the village doctor almost forgotten as the result of several detractors. First there was Balmat himself, greedy for gold, then vainglorious Bourrit, jealous of any effort more fortunate than his own, and finally romancing Dumas, who swung public attention to Balmat. Others such as C. E. Mathews, Dr. Dübi, Freshfield, Montagnier, and E. H. Stevens have since striven to set the facts aright, and it has now fallen to Graham Brown and de Beer to throw further light on the problem.

But the new and sad revelation of the present volume is that de Saussure, the one man whom one thought of as putting truth before all, a neutralist if not openly pro-Paccard, now turns up in the camp of the derogators. De Saussure was well aware of Paccard's initiative; he must have known of the expedition to the Tacul basin, and certainly of the doctor's attempt on the Aiguille de Gôuter. Instead of due acknowledgment in *Voyages* (vol. II), he repeated Bourrit's emphasis and omissions, knowing they were false. When Paccard included his barometric readings on the Aiguille du Gôuter in his letter of September 25, 1785, to de Saussure, he came into scientific competition with the professor, and the reaction of the latter was one of resentment. De Saussure could, with a stroke of his pen, have killed the myth of Balmat's preeminence; but he did not, and thereby failed in his duty as an impartial scientist by supporting Bourrit's falsehoods.

The second part of the book presents in their original form numerous documents, some hitherto unpublished, others in which the text was incomplete or erroneous. The illustrations include many plates in color, reproduced from old prints, portraits of Paccard and Balmat, various photos of

Mont Blanc, and the original sketches made by von Gersdorf at Chamonix on the day of the first ascent.

J. MONROE THORINGTON

Premiers voyages au Mont-Blanc, par. H.-B. de Saussure, M.-T. Bourrit, et leurs contemporains, selected by Daniel May. Paris: Club des Libraires by André Wahl. Price 1950 fr.

In this, the 18th volume of a series *Découverte de la Terre*, an introduction of 39 pages precedes an anthology extracted from the works of de Saussure, Bourrit, and Deluc. The material is grouped under various headings: Chamonix, the Buet, The Tour of Mont Blanc (exploration and conquest of the mountain), and Col du Géant. While it brings under one cover portions of several narratives, all familiar to students of Alpine history, the book adds little to the knowledge of readers who have the original volumes available.

After the visit of Windham and Pococke to Chamonix in 1741, Mont Blanc came to be regarded much as Everest was a century and more afterward. The early confusion between the Buet and Mont Blanc has its parallel in mistaken identity of Himalayan peaks in modern days; while the caravans of guides and porters, impedimenta and provisions lists from the time of de Saussure to Albert Smith reflect in lesser scale the make-up of early expeditions to the Karakoram.

J. MONROE THORINGTON

Snowdon Biography, by Geoffrey Winthrop Young, Geoffrey Sutton, and Wilfrid Noyce. London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1957, 194 pages; 24 ills.; end-paper map. Price \$3.64.

To the American who has climbed in the Welsh mountains, or who has read extensively in the literature of that lovely region, these three essays will provide unusual enjoyment. But most of us who do not fit into either of these two classes will find this little book rather dull. The reader needs an intimate knowledge of the cliffs and crags or, in lieu of that, a deep interest in the men and women climbers whose names parade through the pages.

The first two essays are a chronicle of rock climbing in Wales. This gives little scope for the fine writing for which the authors are so well known. Place names unpronounceable to us abound and the famous climbing figures file past too speedily for the reader here to gain any interest in them. Prior familiarity with the area or the mountaineers is needed.

The third essay, *The Writer in Snowdonia*, traces the literature of the region from the Welsh poets to Wordsworth and on to the rock-climbing