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DISASTER ON THE MATTERHORN
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THE MANY HEROES OF THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN

The moment at which the safety rope linking Edward Whymper's group of climbers snapped, sending four of the men hurtling to their deaths, is depicted in Gustave Doré's engraving of 1865

Tragedy on the Matterhorn

The conquest of the last great Alpine peak in 1865 should have been a triumph but instead ended in the deaths of four climbers. On the 150th anniversary of the incident, **Peter H Hansen** examines its impact on attitudes to mountaineers

A moment was all it took for joy to be supplanted by horror. Less than an hour after Edward Whymper had laughed in jubilation from the summit of the Matterhorn on 14 July 1865 – having completed the first successful ascent of the Alpine peak on the Swiss-Italian border – his triumph was shattered by tragedy.

Among his group was an inexperienced young climber who slipped on a treacherous section of descent, dragging off the mountain three others who were roped to him. On hearing the cries of the falling men, Whymper and his two local guides had just an instant to brace themselves before the force of the accident broke the rope tying them to the falling climbers.

"For a few seconds," Whymper recalled, "we saw our unfortunate companions sliding downwards on their backs, and spreading out their hands, endeavouring to save themselves. They passed from our sight uninjured, disappeared one by one, and fell from precipice to precipice." The four hapless climbers plummeted 1,200 metres, their bodies dashed to pieces on the glacier below.

The Matterhorn accident was one of the deadliest mountaineering catastrophes of the 19th century, sparking a wide debate about mountaineering, masculinity and empire.

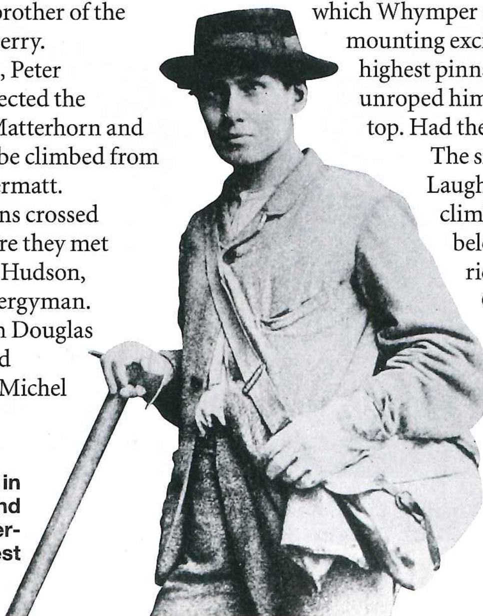
Whymper was the unlikely leader of a climbing team that had been formed only days earlier. This engraver from south London had laid siege to the Matterhorn since 1861, climbing on its southern (Italian) ridges by himself or with guides. On the eve of his 1865 attempt, however, the bravest of these guides, Jean-Antoine Carrel, transferred his services to a group of climbers from Turin who hoped to plant the flag of the recently unified Italy on the summit.

Whymper felt betrayed. By chance, though, he met Lord Francis Douglas, the amiable, 18-year-old younger brother of the Marquess of Queensberry. Douglas's Swiss guide, Peter Taugwalder, had inspected the northern side of the Matterhorn and believed that it could be climbed from the Swiss village of Zermatt.

The new companions crossed into Switzerland. There they met the Reverend Charles Hudson, a muscular English clergyman. He was travelling with Douglas Hadow, an 18-year-old climbing novice, and Michel Croz, a well-known French guide who had previously climbed with Whymper. One of Taugwalder's sons also joined the team.

Since the mid-1850s, many an Alpine summit had felt the scrape of British hobnailed boots attempting first ascents, but the 4,478-metre (14,692ft) Matterhorn remained unconquered. As Whymper's team ascended the north-eastern ridge, they knew the Italians were already climbing on the other side of the mountain. The race to be first was on.

Unexpectedly, the team discovered that the Swiss slopes formed a natural staircase up which Whymper clambered with mounting excitement. Beneath the highest pinnacle, Whymper unroped himself and raced to the top. Had they beaten the Italians? The snow was untrodden. Laughing with joy, the climbers spotted the Italians below, mere dots on the ridge. Whymper and Croz shouted and waved their arms, but were unsure whether they had been seen: "We drove our sticks in, and prized away the crags, and soon a torrent of stones poured down



Edward Whymper in climbing gear around the time of his Matterhorn conquest

TOPFOTO/GETTY

the cliffs. There was no mistake about it this time. The Italians turned and fled."

At the summit, Croz tied his shirt to a tent-pole, creating an impromptu flag visible from all directions. Whymper sketched the panoramic view and chipped off a piece of rock as a souvenir. After building a pile of stones and leaving their names in a bottle, the group began the descent, led by Croz.

Reaching the steepest, most treacherous section, Croz began to manually place Hadow's boots in each step. At a crucial moment, though, Hadow slipped and knocked him over, and Hudson and Douglas were yanked off their feet. Hearing their cries, Whymper and Taugwalder planted themselves firmly to absorb the jerk of the rope: "We held; but the rope broke midway between Taugwalder and Lord Francis Douglas."

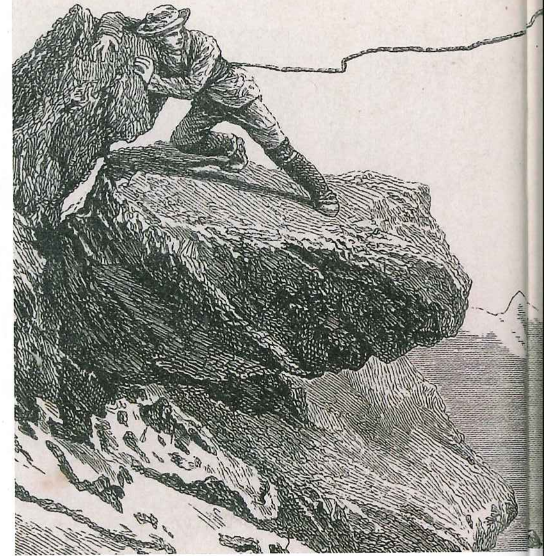
From the moment the rope broke, it was impossible to save those below. Whymper examined the rope and found it to be the weakest cord they had brought, not intended to be used for protection while climbing.

Whymper and the two Taugwalders made the sorrowful descent to Zermatt, from where rescuers left to search for survivors. They found bloodstains, fragments of clothes and shattered human remains. Croz, Hadow and Hudson were identified from shreds of clothing and tufts of beard. Scraps of Lord Francis Douglas's clothing were found, but there was no sign of his body – except, perhaps, for the birds of prey circling the cliffs above the debris field. Visitors to Zermatt's Alpine Museum can today see relics including the frayed end of the rope.

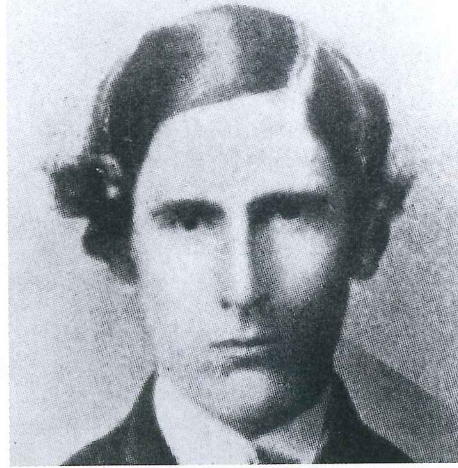
Aftermath of the accident

An inquest in Switzerland found that Hadow was responsible for the accident, clearing Whymper of wrongdoing, but this did little to quell a heated debate about the accident in Britain. *The Times* viewed the ascent of the Matterhorn as "utterly incomprehensible", and asked what right mountaineers had to throw away the gift of life: "Is it duty? Is it common sense? Is it allowable? Is it not wrong?"

Charles Dickens lambasted the climbers as foolhardy braggarts. Mountaineers were not heroic, he said, nor to be compared to those who braved cholera, visited typhus patients or fought in the Crimean War. "We shall be told that 'mountaineering' is a manly exercise," he wrote. "It is so, inasmuch as it is not womanly. But it is not noblemanly when it is selfish." Mountaineering, according to Dickens, was no more manly than gambling and indicated "contempt for and waste of human life – a gift too holy to be played with like a toy, under false pretences, by bragging vanity".



This engraving by Edward Whymper, showing his party tackling a tricky Alpine descent, illustrates his book *Scrambles Amongst the Alps*



The men who fell 1,200 metres to their deaths during the Matterhorn descent (clockwise from top left): Michel Croz, Douglas Hadow, Francis Douglas and Charles Hudson

By contrast, novelist Anthony Trollope compared mountaineers to soldiers, sportsmen and explorers. Death on a mountain was the same as death in battle or on an African expedition. Trollope saw all these as blood shed for the honour of the country. He hoped that the "accident on the Matterhorn may not repress the adventurous spirit of a single English mountain-climber", and looked forward to hearing of new ascents in Asia or South America.

Comparisons to imperial exploration shifted opinion about the Matterhorn accident in favour of the climbers. *The Illustrated London News* likened the victims to English explorers who had died in the Australian outback. Climbing mountains trained Englishmen to follow the call of duty, its editors argued, and contributed to military prowess, commercial prosperity, and scientific knowledge. "There would be small philosophy – nay, small knowledge of the world shown in discouraging adventure. It has given us the empire."

Such celebrations of manliness, exploration

TOPFOTO/MARY EVANS

"Climbing mountains, it was argued, trained Englishmen to follow the call of duty, and **contributed to military prowess,** and scientific knowledge"

and empire persuaded some critics to reassess their dim view of mountaineering. While awaiting Whymper's account of the accident, *The Times* conceded: "Perhaps it is necessary that there should be an order of men to attempt what no one else will attempt, to show what can be done, and the feats which human courage and endurance can perform."

Even John Ruskin, who had censured mountaineers for treating the Alps like "soaped poles in a bear-garden", was moved to temper his criticism. "No blame ought to attach to the Alpine tourist for incurring danger," Ruskin wrote shortly after the Matterhorn accident. "Some experience of distinct peril, and the acquirements of quick and calm action in its presence, are necessary elements at some period of life, in the formation of manly character."

Whymper made similar points in *Scrambles Amongst the Alps* (1871), a lavishly illustrated account of his climbs during the 1860s that remains a touchstone of mountaineering literature. He closed his account of that fateful climb by tallying the benefits of mountaineering beyond enjoying physical fitness and the beautiful scenery: "We value more highly the development of manliness, and the evolution, under combat with difficulties, of those noble qualities of human nature – courage, patience, endurance, and fortitude."

In 1867 Whymper set out to explore the interior of Greenland, but later plans to climb in the Himalayas were stymied by political conditions. Instead, he travelled to Ecuador with Jean-Antoine Carrel, his erstwhile Matterhorn partner and rival. During 1879 and 1880 they collected scientific specimens, researched altitude sickness, and climbed Chimborazo (6,268 metres), among other peaks.

"The real effect of the accident itself," the *Saturday Review* wrote in 1865, "has been to stimulate enterprise and to crowd Zermatt to overflowing." Crowds have only grown over the 150 years since then: Zermatt has become one of the most popular Alpine resorts.

In July, a new and enlarged base-camp lodge, the Hörnlihütte, will open near the spot where Whymper and his party slept before that first ascent in 1865. On 14 July, however, the peak will be closed to all climbers in remembrance, and to honour the people – more than 500 of them – who have died on the Matterhorn since that tragic day in 1865. H

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BOOK

▶ **The Summits of Modern Man: Mountaineering after the Enlightenment** by Peter H Hansen (Harvard, 2013)

Accidents at altitude

The history of climbing is littered with the bodies of unfortunate mountaineers and their guides

The 'Hamel Catastrophe'
Mont Blanc, 1820

The insistence of Dr Joseph Hamel, a Russian naturalist, on climbing Mont Blanc after a heavy snowfall – against his guides' advice – proved disastrous. On 20 August, an avalanche killed three of his Chamonix guides, a tragedy sometimes cited as the first notorious Alpine mountaineering accident. The deaths led in 1821 to the creation of the Company of Guides of Chamonix to regulate pay, provide compensation for families, and ensure guides have authority to make decisions during ascents. The victims became entombed in the slow-moving Bossons Glacier; their remains only emerged from the ice during the 1860s.

The Mallory mystery
Mount Everest, 1924

English mountaineers George Mallory and Andrew Irvine were last seen alive on 8 June 1924, sighted through a break in the clouds as they ascended towards the summit of Everest. Their disappearance so close to the top formed the dramatic climax to the expedition film *The Epic of Everest*, and sparked years of speculation: had they completed the first ascent before their deaths? In 1999, Mallory's frozen body was discovered, presumably at the spot where he fell and died. There was no sign of Irvine, and no proof that they had reached the summit before the fatal accident.

Avalanche on Everest
Mount Everest, 2014

On 18 April 2014, a large block of ice collapsed onto the Khumbu Icefall, the most hazardous section of the most popular route up Everest, killing 16 Nepali expedition workers, most of them ethnic Sherpas. Thirteen bodies were recovered but three remain trapped in the ice. The high death toll led to protests by local workers at Everest Base Camp, demanding better regulation, compensation for families and the cancellation of further climbs that year as a mark of respect for the victims.