

Monte Disgrazia 150th celebrations

Disgrazia N face

Monte Disgrazia holds a pretty special place in the annals of the Alpine Club. Its first ascent in August 1862 is recorded in Volume 1 of the Alpine Journal in 1863. E.S. Kennedy, who had led the party that achieved the ascent was at that time President of the Alpine Club, while Leslie Stephen held that position from 1865-1868.

Kennedy's account of the first ascent is itself a classic, combining typical Victorian pomposity ("The top is an object in every way worthy of attainment, and as an heir-loom to posterity would I transmit it") with a wry and biting humour, especially regarding the conditions in the Italian villages that the party travelled through on their way to and around the mountain ("the establishment [hotel] appeared to be conducted upon the principles of a London joint-stock hotel – numerous propriet[ors], limited liability..."); it is well worth reading for the story at least as much as for the "beta" associated with the route.

Disgrazia has perhaps, like Monte Viso, become slightly overlooked in recent decades by UK climbers. But it remains closely associated with the Alpine Club today through the dedication and extensive work of Giuseppe "Popi" Miotti, an AC member who lives locally, and has worked tirelessly to publicise the mountain, and maintain awareness of its history, current climbing opportunities, and significance within the broader story of 19th Century alpinism. It was Popi who extended the formal offer to Club members to come and commemorate the 150th Anniversary of the first ascent, with a climb planned for 24th August 2012.



Back row: Amadea Scetti & Stephano Scetti (Ponti hut wardens), Fabrizio (CAI Milano)
Middle row: Henry Day, Sash Tusa, Diego Testino
Front row: David (guide), Paul Braithwaite, Alpini Colonel

As well as Popi, the Club was represented by Paul Braithwaite (past President), Henry Day (past Vice President) and Sash Tusa (Associate Member). After a week of acclimatisation in the Valais region, during which we met AC member Jon Halliday at the Vignettes Hut and on Pigne d'Arolla, we arrived in Valmalenco, one of the two bases for climbing in the Disgrazia area, on the 22nd.

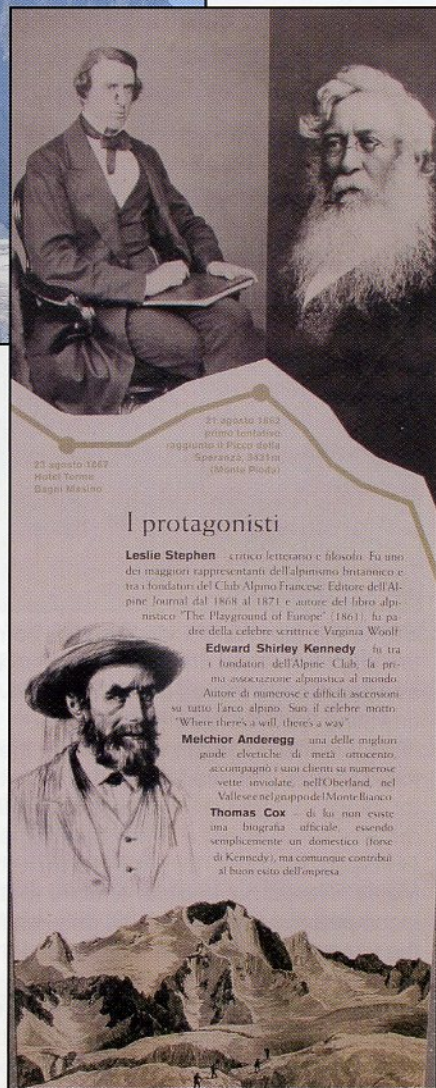
We began rapidly to be aware of two features of the celebrations. Firstly their sheer scale: extensive and detailed hoardings and banners in both Valmalenco and Valmasino, a formal launch of Popi and co-author Michele Comi's book on the history of Disgrazia, exhibitions, and a grand

dinner. And, to cap it all, an open-air dramatisation (in blank verse) by actor and poet Emanuele Franz, of the First Ascent! But underlying all this was an understanding and deep appreciation for the role of the Alpine Club in the ascent.

But it all started inauspiciously: the open-air launch of the whole commemorations triggered a torrential downpour. Luckily, the local church was opened up for us, and over 200 dripping wet people crowded in to hear Popi, and then a speech from Paul Braithwaite on behalf of the Alpine Club. Such was the planning for the celebrations that a translator had even been laid on for Paul!

We became very aware of the more recent history of Disgrazia at dinner: invitees included an excellent representation from many of the most esteemed guides. Perhaps most impressive, however, was 93-year old Fausto Rovelli, a retired doctor. He had made the first ascent of Disgrazia's North Face in 1941!

Even the best commemorations have to end, and the following day we made our way up towards the Refugio Ponti, our



I protagonisti

Leslie Stephen – critico letterario e filosofo. Fu uno dei maggiori rappresentanti dell'alpinismo britannico e tra i fondatori del Club Alpino Francese. Editore dell'Alpine Journal dal 1868 al 1871 e autore del libro alpinistico 'The Playground of Europe' (1861); la padre della celebre scrittrice Virginia Woolf.



Edward Shirley Kennedy – fu tra i fondatori dell'Alpine Club, la prima associazione alpinistica al mondo. Autore di numerose e difficili ascensioni su tutto l'arco alpino. San il celebre motto: 'Where there's a will, there's a way'.

Melchior Anderegg – una delle migliori guide elvetiche di metà ottocento, accompagnò i suoi clienti su numerose vette inviolate, nell'Oberland, nel Vallese e nel gruppo di Monte Bianco.

Thomas Cox – di lui non esiste una biografia ufficiale, essendo semplicemente un domestico (figlio di Kennedy), ma comunque contribuì al buon esito dell'impresa.

base for the climb, following the original route of the AC team. As well as Kennedy and Stephen, the team had included renowned Swiss guide Melchior Anderegg and Kennedy's servant, Thomas Cox. National and historical stereotypes all too rapidly were adopted, with Sash becoming Cox, and carrying the heavy kit, while Paul and Henry (perhaps more naturally gravitating more towards a Leslie Stephen-type aesthete and socialite) strolled ahead. Italian climbers coming down from the hut recognised the set up immediately: they passed Paul, a distinguished figure arrayed in modern outdoor gear. But, seeing Henry, bedecked with a Tilley hat and a rather dashing silk scarf, their eyes lit up: "Are you the Alpine Club?" they asked, almost without exception. The record is strangely blank on whether the answer was "Yes, I am" or "yes, one is".

The Ponti Hut is set within a moraine field that stretched up towards the glacier, and thence Disgrazia's North East Ridge. The hospitality was generous, and the company at dinner good. Perhaps, in retrospect, we should have taken more heed of the Warden's cheerful forecast for the next day: "it will be fine weather, except for storms".

So we rose at 0430 the next morning, and waited briefly for a party that we had been told to expect, and which would accompany us to the summit. They had left the valley at midnight, and walked through the night but, when they arrived, it

became apparent that their leader, a Colonel of Alpini (Italian Special Forces) had yet to break sweat or even breathe deeply. We climbed up a kilometre-long moraine ridge towards the glacier, the croaking ptarmigan on either side of us well out of sight of our head torches. But three hours later, as we approached the glacier in daylight, it became apparent that the wind on the ridge was high, and the clouds were rolling over it. The Alpini Colonel cheerfully volunteered to run up the glacier, and returned, almost within minutes it seemed, with the news that the conditions were unfavourable. And so we retreated back to the Ponti.

The chorus of greetings changed slightly as we walked back down to the car park. Now it was "Inglesi? Your Land Rover has a flat tyre!" But the last word stays with one of the most ancient guides, who came up to Paul and Henry on the night of the celebrations and dinner: "You are the Alpine Club?" he asked, eagerly, "You epitomise all that is best about style and tradition in mountaineering" ↗ **Sash Tusa**

(Our thanks, in particular to Popi, for his superb organisation of the entire 150th celebrations, Stephano and Amadea Scetti, wardens of the Ponti hut, and Fabrizio of the CAI Milan Branch for his hospitality up at the hut. We will be back.)