

Early British Ascents in the Andes (1831–1946)

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Plate 27

The purpose of this short contribution is to summarize those British ascents that took place in the Andes of South America, from 1831, year of the first British Andean ascent, until 1946. Most of these ascents are probably known to the readers of this journal, but some may be wholly new. A few ascents that for several reasons should no longer be included in this chronicle are discussed at the end.

Readers who may feel inclined to study this survey are asked to maintain a proper sense of proportions and of time. A peak that 30 years ago demanded a long and frustrating approach may today be reached in a few hours of driving; a 2700m peak in S Chile has far more glaciation than a 5700m mountain of the Peruvian desert; what was considered to be a difficult ascent some seven decades ago may be regarded today as an easy one-day excursion for a hiker; and a mountain at present devoid of snow may have been snowclad until the end of last century. And so on.

In the following list, names of climbers, peaks climbed (with height and location) and exact date of ascent are given whenever possible. A short comment is added when it may provide some useful or interesting additional information.

Hall, 1831. Col Francis Hall joined French explorer Jean-Baptiste Boussingault to attempt several peaks in the Ecuadorian Andes, but only one actual ascent took place, that of Pichincha (4791m), in the Cordillera Occidental. Pichincha was constantly reported as having had permanent snow until late last century. According to García Moreno, later a president of Ecuador, Hall died tragically in 1833.¹

Jameson, 1857. Botanist William Jameson accompanied the then president of Ecuador, G García Moreno, in an ascent of the same Pichincha.²

White, 1869. R B White wrote a lengthy article for the *Scottish Geographical Magazine*, describing a climb to the summit of Puracé (4650m, Cordillera Central of Colombia), in 1869. This peak also had permanent snow last century, and apparently it only had two previously recorded ascents.³

Downton & Swanston, 1872. A commission of scientists was sent by the Chilean government to explore the mountain land around Lake Llanquihue. These scientists also did some climbing and were joined by George Downton, sent by a London botanical garden to South America to collect ferns, and by a John Swanston, probably a settler in the frontier of southern Chile. Swanston, alone, ascended snowy Volcán Cauye (1431m), in January of that year. Downton and the Chileans attempted to climb Osorno, Chile's Fuji, but a snowstorm

drove them down. In March, Downton, alone, ascended Volcán Hornopirén, 1671m.⁴

Rothwell & Ryder, 1878. The American astronomer Solon Bailey wrote that 'two Englishmen, Messrs Ryder and Rothwell' climbed Misti volcano (5821m, Cordillera Occidental, Peru) and added: '... in attempting to make the circuit of the crater, they lost their way, became exhausted by hunger, thirst and fatigue and perished among the cliffs on the north side of the mountain.'⁵

Whymper, 1879-80. Whymper's famous expedition to Ecuador won the summits of Chimborazo (6267m, two ascents), Cayambe (5789m), Antisana (5705m), Illiniza Sur (5266m, in which Whymper himself did not participate), Cotocachi (4939m), Sincholagua (4909m) and Sara Urco (4676m), all as first ascents; Cotopaxi (5897m), as a fifth, Corazón (4791m), as a possible second, as well as an ascent of Pichincha (4791m). Whymper's expedition to the high Andes of Ecuador has remained one of the most famous in mountaineering history.⁶

FitzGerald & Vines, 1897. With unlimited means at his disposal, Edward FitzGerald led an expedition to climb Aconcagua (6960m), already measured as the highest mountain in the American continent. He had in his party Stuart Vines, as well as other scientists and four Swiss guides of whom one, Matthias Zurbriggen, climbed Aconcagua alone (14 January). Vines and another guide made the second ascent on 13 February. In April, almost at the end of the mountaineering season, Vines and Zurbriggen also climbed Tupungato (6550m). Still another first ascent was that of Cerro Catedral (5330m). The summit of Cerro Penitentes (4350m) was also visited to use it as a survey station; a stone construction was found on the top.⁷

Conway, 1898. The first ascent of Illimani (6402m), in the Cordillera Real of Bolivia, was accomplished by William Martin Conway and guides A Maquignaz and L Pellissier (9 September). In another expedition, Conway nearly ascended Aconcagua and withdrew voluntarily some 15m below the top to help his guide Maquignaz, who had frozen feet. Conway then travelled alone to Tierra del Fuego to attempt Monte Sarmiento.⁸

Wedgewood, 1905-6. Two lines in a work by explorer Fritz Reichert is all that we have about the second ascent of Cerro Tolosa (5370m), in central Argentina, by a Wedgewood (of Newcastle) and his guide Kaufmann, in the season of 1905-6. They also attempted Aconcagua.⁹

Temperley, 1912. La Paloma (4930m) is a beautiful ice peak that forms part of the backdrop of Santiago, the capital of Chile. The first ascent was accomplished when Ridley Temperley, a British resident in that city, together with the Italian Felice Mondini, reached the summit on 20 February 1912. A second Briton, Edwin Trehwela, stopped below the top due to a nasal haemorrhage. Apparently these mountaineers had planned to ascend La Paloma so as to traverse to nearby Cerro Altar, an enterprise they did not attempt.¹⁰

Cox, 1920. The Club Cordillera was the first institution in Chile purely devoted to high mountain climbing. Temperley, Trehwela and Mondini may have been among its members, but they do not appear in the club's activity after the end of the First World War. A large group of the club, comprising Britons, Swiss, Chileans and the Canadian M Robert Barrington, attempted La

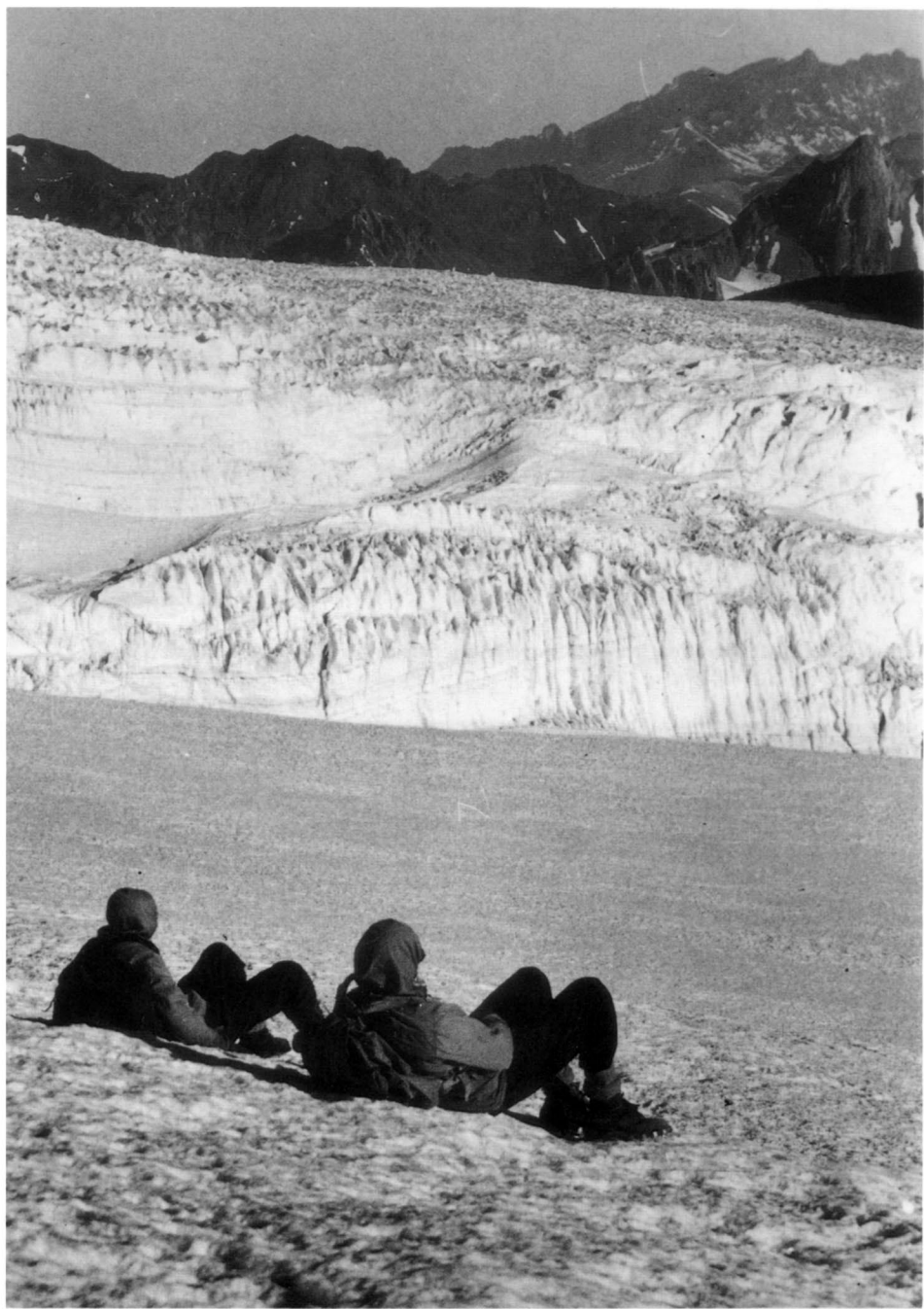


Photo: E. Echevarria

27 *Central Argentina. In background, Cerro Sosneado — first ascent by E. de la Motte's party, 1935. A 1949 photograph.*

Paloma again. Nearly all became mountain sick and only P D Cox made the summit, finding atop the cairn left by a friend (it is assumed, Temperley's, November 1919).¹¹

Barrington, circa 1920. Canadian M Robert Barrington, another member of the Club Cordillera, succeeded in making the first ascent of El Altar (5215m), sister peak of La Paloma, both remarkable mountains that can be seen at advantage from the streets of Santiago, a city only 560m above sea level. Barrington's name was specifically mentioned by a local German, as the first climber of that peak. Another German mentioned that, when he ascended El Altar in the New Year of 1929, he found on the summit a cairn left by two Englishmen. A tin of tobacco 'Prince Albert' was found inside the cairn, but no names were given. The identity of Barrington's companion has never been traced, but in all possibility he may have been Cox, the only Briton in Chile at the time who was active and well trained. Still, the first ascent remains one of the most mysterious in Andean mountaineering history. Barrington was also the founder, and an honorary member, of the Ski Club Chile, so praised years later by Arnold Lunn; he died in Santiago in 1963.¹²

Dyott & Johnson, 1924. G M Dyott, accompanied by G C Johnson (or Johnston) and a local hillman twice ascended Tungurahua (5005m), in the Cordillera Oriental of Ecuador (24 & 25 November). Dyott's main goal had been to climb active Sangay; in this he did not succeed.¹³

Cochrane et al, 1925. J Cochrane and M F Ryan attempted Aconcagua in 1923. Defeated, they returned with two other Britons of whom one, C MacDonald, reached the summit with them (11 February). Profiting from their 1923 failure, they had trained by making the first ascent of Cerro de los Almacenes (5060m) and the possible fourth of Tolosa (5370m).¹⁴

De la Motte, 1928. The Andean career of Edward de la Motte apparently began in 1928 with Aconcagua, highest of all Andean peaks, and ended probably in 1946 with Sajama, highest of Bolivian mountains. With the well-known American novelist James Ramsey Ullman (author of *The White Tower*), he accomplished on 5 March 1928 the fifth ascent of Aconcagua.¹⁵

Trewhela, 1929. The eruption of an unknown volcano in 1929 brought to the southern Chilean Andes, Talca province, a stream of scientists, one of whom was amateur vulcanologist Edwin Trewhela, perhaps a member of the Club Cordillera. He ascended Descabezado Grande (3830m), an iced volcano that had been climbed very few times before.¹⁶

De la Motte & Howat, 1933. Glaciated Volcán Lanín (3776m) is one of the highest mountains in southern Chile-Argentina. Edward de la Motte and A T Howat climbed it on 9 February 1933 and announced it as a first ascent. However, there had been two previous German ascents, in 1897 and in 1921.¹⁷

Matthews, 1935. An international expedition to northern Chile was organized to study the physiology of life at high altitudes. It comprised several Americans, a Dane, a Chilean and a Briton, Bryan H C Matthews (King's College, Cambridge), plus a number of helpers recruited among local Chilean miners. The peak chosen for the research was Cerro Aucanquilcha (6180m), located in Antofagasta province. The highest camp was at over 6100m and was inhabited by all participant scientists from 29 June to 14 July 1935. The summit itself,

which had been ascended before by miners (there is a large sulphur mine at 5300m), was also visited several times by these scientists.¹⁸

De la Motte, 1935. Cerro Sosneado (5160m) in central Argentina, highest mountain in the southern hemisphere south of 32S received its first known ascent when Edward de la Motte and unmentioned companions climbed it on 17 November 1935.¹⁹

Bullock, 1938. Although he failed on Illiniza Sur, G H Bullock, alone, ascended to the crater rim of Cotopaxi, on 13 June 1938.²⁰

Gunther & Chenery, 1939–40. Gunther's Andean expeditions stand on the same footing as Whymper's ascents of the highest peaks of Ecuador and Vines's of the highest peaks of Argentina: he accomplished the first ascent of some of the highest peaks of yet another Andean country, Venezuela. Gunther joined the German Franz Weiss, who in February 1936 had reached alone the highest point of Bolívar (5002m). Weiss, Gunther, a second Briton, E Chenery, and two Venezuelans set out again for Pico Bolívar, which is the highest mountain in Venezuela. Chenery climbed to the summit with two others, on 3 February 1939, a fifth ascent. Weiss, joined by Gunther, reascended Bolívar via the SW ridge, a new route, and then both plus two Venezuelan porters (and dog 'Caribe') made the first ascent of La Concha (4922m), on 6 February. Gunther's exploits did not end there. He returned a year later to ascend, alone, Pico Bonpland (4883m; 3 February 1940), and Bolívar's S peak, today called Pico Abanico (4900m). Gunther's name has been inscribed in the monument to the explorers of the Sierra Nevada de Mérida, existing in Mérida itself.²¹

De la Motte, 1940. During the early years of the Second World War, three Germans made what has been called a 'political ascent' of Illimani (6402m), in the Cordillera Real of Bolivia, on whose summit they planted their flag with the swastika. De la Motte, after training a Bolivian to accompany him in the climb, made 'an equally political ascent' to remove the said flag (4 July 1940).²²

De la Motte & Rees, 1942. The attractive ice and rock peak of Ninacollo (5488m), pertaining to the SE corner of the Cordillera Quimsa Cruz of Bolivia, had its first ascent at Easter 1942, accomplished by Edward de la Motte, British diplomat T Ifor Rees and the Bolivian Jesús Torres.²³

Crombie, 1945. After failing a first time in 1944, Theodore Crombie, with an Argentinian and an American, returned the next year to climb the W face of Cerro Tolosa (5370m), in central Argentina, a new route (27 February 1945).²⁴

De la Motte & Rees, 1946. The two Britons of Ninacollo, two Bolivians and an American made the third ascent of Nevado Sajama (6520m), Bolivia's highest mountain (6 August 1946). A windstorm dragged the American, T Pohlemus, off the mountain. His body has never been found.²⁵

The above survey includes actual ascents only, attempts having been omitted. Two other ascents previously ascribed to British mountaineers have been removed from this list:

— *Flint, circa 1854.* In several sources it has been mentioned that a British engineer named Edward Flint ascended the very high volcanic peak of Incahuasi (6610m, N Chile-Argentina), probably between 1854 and 1859. In 1912 Walther Penck, who climbed this peak, found on the summit a wooden twig or branch and it was thought that it had been left there, according to a local

legend collected by Penck himself, by a certain engineer. It is not known who was the first to ascribe that ascent to Flint, who was indeed an engineer prospecting the construction of a possible railroad passing north of Incahuasi, together with another British engineer named Bolfe (or Rolfe?) and a Chilean one, Naranjo. Only in later years has it been learned that it was the Incas who left such a type of record on Andean summits (the name of the peak itself means ‘abode of the Inca’). Thus, the first ascent of Incahuasi belongs most probably to the Incas, followed by Penck in 1912.

— *Barrington, 1922*. M Robert Barrington, Canadian-born and living in Chile, belonged to the Club Cordillera, which launched a large expedition to ascend San José (5880m), a massive volcano in the cordillera of Santiago. A summit was reached on 27 December 1922 by three members of the club, and it was claimed at that time as the first ascent of the mountain. But Barrington and companions had apparently not deceived themselves, since they left in a cairn a note stating that they would return another time to climb to the true summit. They never returned. Very little is known about the enterprises of that pioneer South American climbing institution in which Barrington played an important role.

It is possible that geologist-geographer J C Harrison and his companions may have accomplished during the 1940s some ascents in central Peru, but information is lacking.

The writer has been unable to trace any other ascent by British travellers and mountaineers. Additions and corrections to the above survey are therefore invited. He wishes to express his gratitude to D F O Dangar for much useful information and advice.

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