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## Beatrice Tomasson and the South Face of the Marmolada

(Plates 42, 58)

### **Beatrice Tomasson (1859-1947)**

Some ten years ago I climbed with friends up the South Face of the Marmolada. The climbing was very difficult and the commitment demanding. Who had put up this route? It turned out to be an Englishwoman, Beatrice Tomasson, who had done the first ascent almost 100 years before with two of the best mountaineering guides in the Dolomites. This much I could read in every Dolomite guidebook but could find nothing more about her, either in Alpine literature or a women's bibliography. It was a long trail from the Marmolada to archives in England, to her husband's nieces in London and, finally, to a very complex set of relatives, the descendants of her father's brother in Paris. All other branches of the Tomasson family had died out.

Beatrice Sybil Tomasson was born on 25 April 1859 as the second child of William and Sarah Anne Tomasson (née Hopkinson, b.1835) on the estate of Barnby Moor in the parish of Blyth, in Nottinghamshire. According to the census of 1861 there were over 30 people employed on the 711-acre farm. Beatrice's father (b.1832) was the son of a textile industrialist from Thurlstone, Yorkshire; her mother a farmer's daughter born at the village of Oxtun, Nottinghamshire. In 1868, when Beatrice was just ten years old, the family moved from Barnby Moor to Ireland, to settle at a country house named Gortnamona near Tullamore in King's County.

There is nothing to be found about the course of her formal education in the family chronicle. It was usual in the English landed gentry at this time for tutors to be hired for the education of the children. Certainly the linguistic training by a tutor was not sufficient for her later occupation as a private tutor in the houses of Prussian Generals. It is known that she studied German and was fluent in Italian and French. Although it was unthinkable for a German woman in this period to study, there were already women in England at the universities. By the late 1870s women were studying at many universities apart from Oxford and Cambridge and were even beginning to get degrees. A pioneer in this respect was University College London, which began awarding degrees to women in 1878. The educational system was developed in the reign of Queen Victoria, and so was sport for women. I assume Beatrice was educated for several years at such an institution.

### Family portrait

Beatrice's upbringing was not typical of Victorian society. She spent her childhood at Barnby Moor and her teens on a farm in Ireland. Her father had emigrated from Nottinghamshire for economic reasons and was a tenant on cheap land there. The children of the Tomasson family, the two girls as well, grew up with horses and shotguns, more the wild west than a typical bourgeois family. William, Beatrice's older brother, took part in the Zulu Wars in 1879 during which the Empire overwhelmed the army of Cetewayo. William wrote a book about this 'exciting campaign': *With the Irregulars in Transvaal and Zululand* (Remington & Co, 1881). At the age of 30, he started his career as the Chief Constable of Nottinghamshire and he was given a peerage in 1906. Thomas, the younger brother, emigrated to America. The last known photo, dated 1895, before the start of the Spanish-American war, shows him in uniform on horseback.

The 22-year-old Beatrice went to Prussia as a private tutor to one of the noblest households, the house of General Bülow in Potsdam and to manors in Silesia. Her sister Nelly went to Russia as a governess; soon after her departure came news of her drowning while swimming. These events from her family history and youth certainly formed Beatrice's character, especially her determination to cope, her toughness and her tenacity.

### Literary and intellectual works

In 1883, at the age of 23, Beatrice lived in Potsdam, Prussia. She worked for the Prussian General von Knobloch as a companion. In that year she began her translation into English of the four-volume work *A Fight for Rome* by Felix Dahn, then a bestseller. The negotiations with the publishers, Bentley & Sons, are kept in the manuscript department of the British Library. Beatrice could not afford to undertake a complete translation at her own expense and suggested Bentley agree to accept half the profits. The contract was never signed.

She was successful with her next project. Together with Cäcilie Wüstenburg she wrote and translated *The Chimes of Erfurt, a Tale*. This book was published in 1885 in London by the Literary Society. These literary works occupied Beatrice for at least a few years. Apparently after that she had no further literary ambitions and according to my present knowledge did not publish her mountain adventures. There are no diaries in the family archives. When I carefully read the documents, a handful of letters and references for her mountain guides, written in German, Italian and English, a precise phraseology and a clear capacity for judgement become apparent. It is this capacity and not any evidence of a formal education which causes me, without hesitation, to describe Beatrice as an intellectual.

### Mountaineer

The portrayal of Beatrice as 'an intrepid mountaineering woman', is found repeatedly in Alpine literature. Apparently she had concluded her literary

activities in about 1885 and transferred her ambitions to climbing. A photo of her in alpinist's clothes, with ice-axe and crampons, was taken at the Innsbruck photo studio *Senorer*, dated 1883. Beatrice lived in Innsbruck for a few years where she became a member of the Austrian Alpine Club in 1893, together with about a dozen other women; for example, Marie Geisberger, the owner of the hotel Zur Stadt München. Here Beatrice was employed as a governess to Edward Lisle Strutt (1874-1948), nephew of Lord Belper, the textile magnate. She was 15 years his senior. He had been a student in Innsbruck since 1892 and went into the diplomatic service after his studies and later became President of the Alpine Club, as well as a distinguished Editor of the *Alpine Journal*. Strutt wrote that Beatrice had accompanied him from 1892 on many expeditions in the Tyrol, the Ötztaler, Stubai and the Karwendel ranges. They climbed together for two seasons and family lore reveals that 'the student eloped with his governess'. From 1896 Beatrice enjoyed mountain ventures in the Dolomites where she stayed at Cortina and returned for several seasons.

With the mountain guide Michele Bettega, she made several first ascents in the Pala group and went on adventurous climbs with the guide Arcangelo Siorpaes in the area around Cortina. I think she was a proficient mountaineer herself after a decade of climbing with Strutt and the Dolomite guides. Strutt wrote in his mountaineering memoirs in 1942: 'In later years she achieved for the first time the two best snow and rock expeditions in the Tyrol: the East Face of Monte Zeburu and the South Face of Marmolada'.

### **First ascents with the best mountain guides**

Beatrice took trips to a variety of mountain ranges, always with the best guides of the time, predominantly in the Dolomites:

**1897** With mountain guide Michele Bettega in the Pala range. First ascents of: Cima d'Alberghetto, Torre del Giubileo, Campanile della Regina Vittoria, Monte Lastei d'Agner, Sasso delle Capre.

**1898** With guides Hans Sepp Pinggera and Friedrich Reinstadler, the NE Face of Monte Zeburu in the Ortler range, rock III, 55° ice, a first ascent and at this time the most difficult ice wall in the Tyrol; with Hans Sepp Pinggera, the SW Face of Ortles, rock III, 50° ice, another first ascent; with Luigi Rizzi from Canazei, the second ascent of the Laurinswand West Face, up until then the most difficult rock wall in the Dolomites.

**1900** With Luigi Rizzi on the Dent di Mesdi South Face in Sella range, a first ascent at grade IV in July.

**1901** Her greatest adventure was the widely desired South Face of the Marmolada di Penia, with the guides Michele Bettega and Bartolo Zagonel.

**1911** In the last year of her Alpine career she made the first traverse of Campanile Basso with guide Angelo Dibona, the most successful rock climber at this time; they were accompanied by her esteemed Michele Bettega.

Beatrice's most important undertaking was the first ascent of the Marmolada South Face with the guides Bartolo Zagonel and Michele Bettega from Primero at the foot of the Pala range. Zagonel and Bettega began the age of the professional mountain guide in the Eastern Alps. It signalled the end of the romantic and naïve age of Alpine mountaineering. With the start of the First World War – the guides were in the war – Beatrice's mountaineering exploits ended.

### **Marmolada expedition**

The best climbers of the time had already repeatedly tried the face. Most notable was Luigi Rizzi's attempt in the autumn of 1900 when he found a route up to the first terrace, the most difficult part of the wall; he soloed up and down it without rope or pitons. Rizzi had been engaged by Tomasson to reconnoitre a route up the face; but in spite of this achievement I don't know why she didn't employ him as guide on the 1901 expedition. Beatrice made reconnaissances and several attempts; the last survey was with Michele Bettega. The entry in Bettega's Führerbuch reads: 'June 20th 1901 Passo Ombretta to see the South Wall of the Marmolada'.

The Marmolada South Face is, in my view, the most prominent in the Dolomites. The ascent took twelve hours of climbing. Equipment consisted of ropes, pitons and specialist climbing shoes. They bivouacked at the foot of the wall to ensure an early start, there being then no huts on this side of the mountain except for the shepherd's hut on the Malga Ombretta. Two porters carried the nailed boots as well as warm clothing and champagne over the Fedaja glacier to the summit. There were, of course, critics and sceptics in the Alpine journals and several people voiced their doubts over this first ascent, like Edward Broome who wrote in the *Alpine Journal* of 1907: 'Details have never transpired, nor is it even known if and how the summit was gained, and,' he continued, 'from time to time we saw small pitons which were of course useless for ascending, so could only be supposed to have been fixed by a former party with a view to possible descent.'

The guides Zagonel and Bettega were generously rewarded. They received a whole year's salary for their Marmolada success. The reward of 400 Kronen would have the value of some £50 at the time. On their way up the South Face they had left several pegs in the rock as unmistakable signs, as well as newspaper wrappers, addressed to Miss Tomasson, Cortina. A description of the first ascensionists' route was never published, a shortcoming for which Beatrice was blamed. The guides also never forwarded information, even when asked. Successors were supposed to have a tough time of it.

### Evidence of the first ascent

The Italian captiano of the Marmolada Front, Arturo Andreoletti, had investigated and collected all available information about the climb of the Marmolada South Face in researching his area of command. He was with the first Italian party to climb the wall in August 1908 with his friend Carlo Prochownick and guide Serafino Parissenti. To do his job thoroughly, Andreoletti climbed the route three times before the Great War. He had also interviewed Beatrice and reported on it.

The most valuable documents which have been handed down to us are the entries from Zagonel's and Bettega's Führerbücher. For sceptics there is Bettega's letter to Andreoletti. Bettega wrote on 4 July 1908: 'We climbed from Caprile to the Malga Ombretta and bivouacked on the Ombretta pass. The wall and the chimneys are the most difficult that I have ever done. It was on 1st July 1901.' He remarked that some colleagues had failed in spite of various attempts. In other words, Bettega was proudly reporting this first ascent.

There is also the detailed report of the whole expedition by Nina Callegari, the proprietor of the Hotel Belvedere at Caprile, to the secretary of the Italian Alpine Club, a paper unearthed recently by Bepi Pellegrinon, the eminent author of Marmolada books.

### Early accounts

Within the next ten years, half a dozen essays appeared in the European Alpine magazines by subsequent ascensionists:

- Georg Leuchs – second ascent – made a 12-page report in the *Deutsche Alpen Zeitung* (Munich, 1903). Leuchs had written to Zagonel but had not received any route description from him. The Leuchs brothers' team had great problems with route-finding and finally on the top third of the wall lost trace of the first ascensionists' route and struggled to get to the top via a new exit. After a reconnaissance of three days, a rest day and two days of climbing with a bivouac, their expedition took a week in total. Incidentally the Leuchs brothers were acclaimed as among the greatest heroes of their day.
- Ferdinand Langsteiner in the *Österreichische Alpenzeitung* (Vienna 1905)
- Edward Broome in the *Alpine Journal* (London 1907). The party considered the expedition to be the finest in the Dolomites. Broome was one of the most remarkable climbers of his day. He concentrated on the most difficult expeditions of the time, particularly at Zermatt, Chamonix and in the Dolomites. He repeated the Marmolada climb three times within the next five years.

- Etienne Renaud wrote in *La Montagne* (Paris 1908), after the eighth ascent of the wall, that the Marmolada wall was twice as long and as strenuous as the Grépon East Face in the Mont Blanc Massif. The ascent of the Grépon East Face was then considered one of the most famous climbs in the Alps.
- Arturo Andreoletti in *Revista del Club Alpino Italiano* (Turin 1910)
- The first topo appeared in 1905 in the *Österreichische Alpenzeitung* by the artist and climber, Gustav Jahn.
- The *Alpine Journal* published the first detailed route description in 1907 by Edward Broome.

The ascent of the Marmolada South Face was regarded then, and for more than a decade, as the longest and the most difficult climb in the Alps.

### **Assessment from today's perspective**

The summit of the Marmolada di Penia is only one of several on the three kilometre wide and 500 to 800-metre high South Face of the Marmolada which is, in my opinion, the most prominent climbing wall in the Dolomites, and the most inviting. Today there are almost 100 different routes up this face. I have climbed seven of them, which I consider to be among my best memories.

Ken Wilson describes this route in *Bâton Wicks'* new topo guide *Classic Dolomite Climbs* as follows: 'A 650m route of sustained grade 4 with some 5-, on a major and quite serious unclimbed face, completed in a day – a major landmark in both Alpine and women's climbing. Also of note is Rizzi's initial solo climb and descent.'

### **Women's climbing in Cortina**

Cortina d'Ampezzo, in the central Dolomites, was at the turn of the century the meeting-place and the playground for a handful of ambitious women climbers. From a present day tourist's perspective it was described as the 'salon of the Alps'.

A month after the first ascent of the Marmolada South Face, the Hungarian Baronesses Ilona and Rolanda Eötvös climbed the South Face of Tofana, a similar undertaking, with the renowned Dolomite guides Angelo Dibona, Giovanni Siorpaes and Agostino Verzi. Other women belonging to this scene in Cortina were Maud Wundt, the wife of General Theodor von Wundt, the Dutch Jeanne Immink, and the Berlin pianist Käte Bröske with an early ascent of the Marmolada South Face in 1906. The subject of women's climbing, at the turn of the century is an absolutely untitled field in the history of Alpine climbing. From 1918 on, male heroes and their myths dominated the scene; for example, Sepp Innerkofler and his death on the Paternkofel.

### **Governess by profession**

Until the beginning of the War Beatrice worked as a governess, mostly abroad. As we know from family history, 'she lived at an awful lot of places'. This nomadic life made reassembling her biography a detective story; the sketch of her by John Singer Sargent, for example, was provided by a relative living in Paris.

During the years of her mountaineering career she lived and worked as governess at Innsbruck, London, Copenhagen, Graz, Cortina, Nottingham, and Brierley, to name just a few of the places. She must have learned to be at home with a wide range of social types, not only the English gentry but Prussian generals, the Austrian bourgeoisie, and Italian aristocracy.

How could she have afforded these costly mountaineering holidays with guides? We know Beatrice worked as governess for wealthy families. In 1901, the year her Uncle Dymond died, she worked for her Aunt Anne at Burntwood Hall, Brierley, Yorkshire. As I learned from her publishing venture, Beatrice knew all about contracts. At Burntwood Hall she was employed as private secretary with an income of about £150 a year, compared to the £450 her brother earned as Chief Constable of Nottinghamshire. In this way she could pay her guides very generously for the Marmolada venture.

### **Horse riding**

According to Strutt, Beatrice was 'an accomplished horsewoman'. When she was in Prussia, she was known as a daring horserider. Family legend has it that she broke in horses that even the Prussian officers could not tame. There's supposed to be a photo of her 'capturing a horse by a forward dive'. General Bülow presented her with a horse which she took back to England. A stable stands today next to the house in Little Benhams where, until the age of 80, Beatrice kept two riding horses. Every year she went on hunting and riding trips to Ireland. In one interview she was described by a friend, still living today, as 'a terrific horsewoman'.

### **Mrs Mackenzie**

Beatrice Tomasson was aged 42 when she climbed the Marmolada South Face. She remained a spinster until the age of 61. In spring of 1921 Beatrice married Patrick Chalmers Mackenzie, of Scottish gentry, in London. They moved to Mackenzie's estate, Little Benhams near Rusper, Sussex, where they spent the rest of their lives. Beatrice wrote in her last Will: 'the many happy years of our life together will ever be for me a treasured memory'. Although she employed staff and a gardener in her household and on her small farm, she chopped her own firewood at the great age of 80. Her husband died on 9th March 1944. Beatrice died on 13th February, 1947, at the age of 87. Her obituary recounts her activities in the parish and various local women's clubs, and describes her physical and intellectual vitality right up to her death.

### **Independence and pride**

Beatrice was financially as well as intellectually totally independent. I think the completely different periods of her life prove this. It was perhaps her independence that led to the misogynistic assessment of her Marmolada achievement in Alpine literature. A photo in an Alpine history book from Cortina shows Beatrice in a fashionable outfit. She is proudly wearing a hat of peacock feathers. Her confident manner and her appearance are probably a reason why Beatrice fell into disfavour with Alpine historians. When Beatrice celebrated her 50th birthday she had her portrait painted in Florence by the famous portrait artist John Singer Sargent. It was eight years since her first ascent of the Marmolada South Face, 'the finest hours of my life'. The Viennese, Hubert Peterka, characterised Beatrice in the *Österreichische Alpenzeitung* in 1974 as 'a young English woman who was infected with pride and ambition' [*einem englischen Fräulein, das hochgradig von Stolz und Ehrgeiz befallen war*].

As another example of misogyny, it has to be noted that although Beatrice went on several trips with Strutt, neither the Alpine Club nor its archive acknowledge her. When I asked the club several years ago the answer was simply 'we had no female members then'.\* It would be interesting to browse through Colonel Strutt's diaries of his time at Innsbruck.

### **Determination and happiness**

After the Marmolada climb, Beatrice wrote in Zagonel's Führerbuch: 'Zagonel showed splendid qualities, climbed magnificently & faced the intense cold and every difficulty with a pluck worthy of the best traditions of an Alpine guide.'

I think this description of Zagonel is also a fundamental part of her own personality, characterised by courage and determination. This is one side of her character. The other side reads: 'the many happy years of our life together will ever be for me a treasured memory', which sounds more like a 'Beatles' song than a passage from her Will. This is, in her own words, a concise view of the last 25 years of her resolute and fortunate life.

### **Character**

Beatrice was an 'extraordinary character, very determined', according to a statement by her relative Paul Démogé of Paris. Her determination was in those days a completely unfeminine attribute. Her niece Mrs Philomena Baynes (b.1928) from her husband's side of the family described her simply as 'masculine' and 'wiry'. 'Wiry' is an appropriate description of her character. No curls, hair combed straight back into a bun, and no smile on her face, a completely unEnglish aunt in her wonderful country house down

\* *Editor's note:* The Ladies' Alpine Club was founded in 1907. It would be interesting to hear from any former members who can offer an insight.

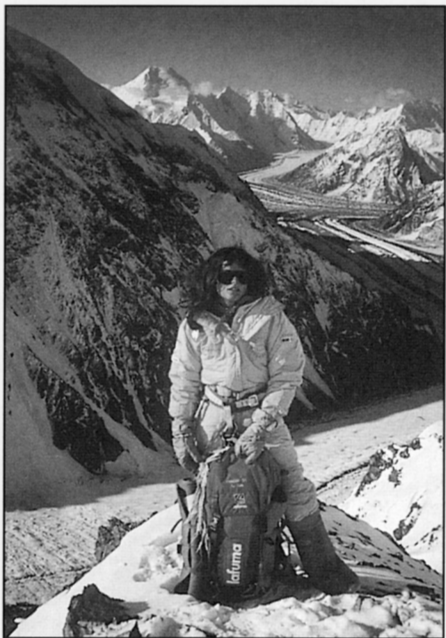


in Sussex, was her niece's memory of Beatrice. 'We cousins in London had a nickname for our aunt: "the old hairpin".'

**Further reading:**

Bepi Pellegrinon & Hermann Reisach: *Salve ... Regina! La Marmolada dei Pioneri*. Nuovi Sentieri Editore, Belluno, 2001. ISBN 88-85510-14-0 (trilingual).

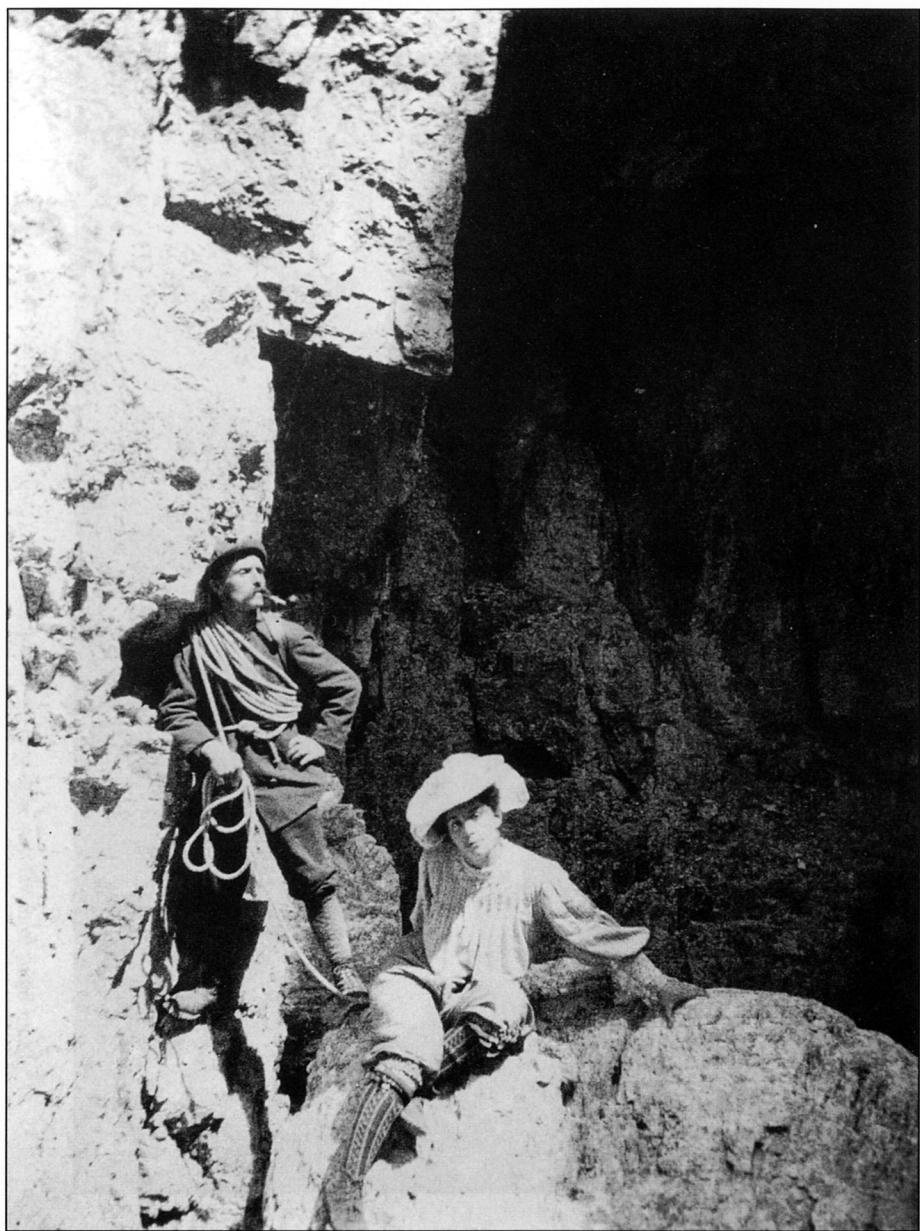
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SOME NOTABLE FEMALE CLIMBERS FROM THE 20TH CENTURY

40. to 45. *Clockwise from top left:* Alison Hargreaves on the S side of Everest in 1994; Catherine Destivelle in the Exit Cracks, North Face of the Eiger; Wanda Rutkiewicz, the first woman to climb K2, along with seven other 8000ers, before her death on Kangchenjunga in 1992; Jill Lawrence (*left*) the leading 1980s female rock climber, talking to the late Janet Adam Smith at the 1988 Festival of Mountaineering Literature at Bretton Hall; Chantal Mauduit who climbed six 8000ers before her death on Dhaulagiri in 1998; and Beatrice Tomasson, who kicked off the century with a futuristic guided ascent of the South Face of the Marmolada di Penia. The portrait is by the fashionable late 19th century artist John Singer Sargent.

(*Sprayway; Destivelle collection; Rutkiewicz collection; Ed Douglas; Mauduit collection.*) (p99)



58. Beatrice Tomasson with the guide Arcangelo Siorpaes on the Becco di Messodi near Cortina. (*Carlo Gandini Collection*) (p204)