

“Lower It Would Not Go” – Travels amongst the Great Andes by Edward Whymper in 1879-1880

Jane INSLEY, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

Edward Whymper is probably best known for the first successful ascent of the Matterhorn, the highest mountain in Europe, in 1865. Of the seven climbers to attempt it, four died during the descent; mountain climbing then was regarded as still an extension of “scrambling”, although standards of professionalism and safety were beginning to be taken more seriously. Whymper also travelled to the Great Andes in Ecuador, primarily to investigate the effects of altitude sickness on humans and animals (with himself and his team as guinea pigs). An important part of his journey revealed that the mapping of the areas inland from the coast and near to Quito was very inadequate; he attempted to follow the path taken by Alexander von Humboldt in the 1820s, and to repeat barometrical measurements on various peaks in the area.

Until Humboldt’s time, Chimborazo was considered to be the highest mountain in the world. By the time of Whymper’s trip, this was known to be untrue, and that accolade had been given to Mount Everest in the Himalayas. The height of Mount Everest had been determined during the measurement of sightings of peaks from fixed stations at a considerable distance, and the calculations which identified it took place some four years after the original measurement. In the case of Chimborazo, the mountain could and had been climbed, with mercury barometers for summit measurements. Whymper took both mercury and aneroid barometers with him to check the earlier work, and entrusted their care to two Alpine guides who accompanied him, the Carrel cousins from Val Tournanche.

The subsequent account of his journey was copiously illustrated with engravings, giving a vivid picture of their progress (or otherwise).

CONTACT

Ms Jane Insley
Science Museum. Exhibition Road,
London SW7 2DD
UNITED KINGDOM
Tel. + 44 (0) 207 942 4213
Fax + 44 (0) 207 942 4103
E-mail: j.insley@nmsi.ac.uk
Web site: www.sciencemuseum.org

HS4 Surveying and Mapping the Americas – In the Andes of South America

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