

Memoirs of an amateur archivist

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MEMOIRS OF AN AMATEUR ARCHIVIST

“You’re telling me you lost the axe?” The voice on the phone sounded incredulous. It belonged to a Herr Doktor Pfefferkorn, an alpine writer from a neighbouring large canton. He’d heard that the AACZ had preserved an axe brought down from Aconcagua by one of its pioneers. By report, this must have been the axe of the English climber who made the mountain’s second ascent in 1897. When Robert Helbling, an AACZ founder, made the third ascent (and first solo) nine years later, he brought the lightning-blasted relic home as a trophy.

This backstory was news to me – for up until then I hadn’t bothered much with club history. But now it was time to learn up. My predecessor, Klaus Minges, had recently appointed me as the club’s archivist. This was around the turn of the current century. He made the announcement by mass e-mail, making this an invitation that was hard to refuse. Alas, unlike Klaus, a museum curator, I had no experience of catalogues and classification. So the AACZ’s new archivist was *sensu stricto* a very amateur one.

Still, the question of the axe intrigued me. At Dr Pfefferkorn’s instigation, enquiries were made among our most venerable Altherren. Yes, they remembered the axe well; it used to hang on a wall at the Saffran guildhouse, in the days when the club used to meet there. But, after that, the trail ran cold. Nobody could remember what happened to the axe when we moved to the Restaurant “Zum Grünen Glas”. So it was that I

found myself apologizing to Herr Doktor Pfefferkorn for our carelessness with the club’s heritage.

Such expressions of regret were not infrequent. Since the AACZ’s emphasis has always been on climbing, not record-keeping, the archives are patchy. We do have a complete run of the club’s journals and protocol books. And there is a large photography collection from early last century (which in 2017 was handed over to the ETH library). But, after that, our collective memory starts to fade. Only a few of the club’s expeditions are documented. Thus, soon after disappointing Herr Pfefferkorn, I had to send relatives of Jules Jacot-Guillarmod away empty-handed – they’d been researching the Swiss doctor’s 1905 attempt on Kanchenjunga together with the British dilettante, Aleister Crowley, later to be excoriated by the popular press as “the wickedest man in the world”. They got nowhere near the summit, and several Sherpas died in an avalanche. It could be a mercy that our medical forebear’s part in this debacle remains obscure.

A particular challenge was to manage expectations. Would-be visitors no doubt imagined that they would be received by a silver-haired archivist, and ushered respectfully through wood-panelled corridors to a comfortable library walled with glass-fronted cabinets bulging with alpine classics. Instead, they found themselves rummaging through dusty cupboards in the basement of the Fluntern sports centre or the ETH building. Disappointment was inevitable. How

could we be so remiss with the records of Opi's achievements in the mountains?

Even so, our archive has, on occasion, made signal contributions to the sum of alpine knowledge. When the half-centennial of Everest's first ascent came up in 2003, journalist and AACZ member Edgar Schuler made use of its resources when writing an article for the NZZ. His subject was George Finch, who was elected to the club in 1909 while studying chemistry at the ETH and became its president a few years later. In 1922, Finch was picked by George Mallory for the first attempt on Everest.

Entitled "English air", Edgar's piece focused on the pioneering oxygen apparatus devised by Finch. With its help, Finch was one of the climbers who, for the first time ever, breached the 8,000-metre mark on a mountain. Unfortunately, he was not invited on the follow-up expedition two years later, probably after falling out with Mallory.

Finch's side of the story, and his thoughts on supplementary oxygen, were published in *Der Kampf um den Everest*, which appeared in 1925. But this book remained all but unknown to the English-speaking world. That changed when Edgar's article brought it to the attention of George Rodway, an American expert on high-altitude medicine. Dr Rodway arranged

the translation of *Der Kampf um den Everest*, which in turn fed into the definitive account of Finch's part in the Everest story in Wade Davis's magisterial *Into the Silence: The Great War, Mallory, and the Conquest of Everest* (2011).

After more than a decade as the AACZ's archivist, I began to suspect the day of the amateur was over. Not only did the ETH want to renovate our storeroom, forcing another move, but we had started to appreciate the significance of the club's collection of old photographs, mostly in the form of black-and-white glass slides. For these and other reasons, it was time to call on a professional. The chance came when several historians joined the club. One of them, Florian Rohner of Zurich University, has kindly consented to take over.

In passing, I would like to thank the CC for its unfailing support and advice, and also the group of volunteers – too many to name individually – who some years ago spent several dusty evenings re-cataloguing, packing and transporting the archives when we moved them from Fluntern to the ETH. And Florian, I wish you all success with the unfinished quest for the Lost Axe of Aconcagua. One day, I'm sure it will turn up.

Martin Hood