

Storylines

The British Mountaineering Tradition in Trentino

British mountaineers were the first to blaze a trail in Trentino, from John Ball in 1852 to Edward Robson Whitwell in 1870, who scaled the Cimon della Pala peak, the Matterhorn of the Dolomites. These intrepid individualists conquered daunting peaks and glaciers before the baton passed inevitably to the Austrians and Germans.

Le Corbusier described the Dolomites as the most beautiful natural architecture in the world while Leslie Stephen, a pioneering mountaineer and father of Virginia Woolf, likened the characteristic Brenta group to Sir Christopher Wren's great St Paul's Cathedral. As a region, Trentino is defined by the Dolomites and Lake Garda, equally impressive natural wonders. The eastern end of Trentino is dominated by the towering Dolomitic peaks known as the Pale di San Martino while the western side of the region is dwarfed by the Brenta Dolomites. Elsewhere, other mountainous landmarks include the Latemar and the Lagorai, the Maddalene and the Adamello Presanella groups.

The Alps have always represented a challenge to man's skill, strength and ingenuity. Yet while the Dolomites were named after a Frenchman, the British were the first to demystify them. By the same token, although the region now produces some of Italy's best known skiers, climbers, and cyclists, the Dolomites were first climbed and charted by British mountaineers. These 19th-century adventurers were often larger-than-life figures in the heroic Victorian mould. In particular, British mountaineers linked to the fledgling Alpine Club of London discovered the Dolomites and waxed lyrical about the grandeur of these glorious peaks in countless reports and alpine journals. This explosion of interest marked the beginning of professional mountaineering industry and determined the fate of the Dolomites, and Trentino, as a tourist destination for the future.

In Trentino, the names of John Ball, Douglas Freshfield, Francis Fox Tuckett and Edward Robson Whitwell are revered as the pioneering mountaineers who put the Dolomites well and truly on the map. Not that the Victorian mountaineers' contribution was limited to climbing and charting the peaks. These multi-faceted explorers often left trail-blazing maps, artistic sketches and stirring accounts of their adventures, from scientific studies on geology and botany to romantic travel-writing. In their various writings, whether scientific journals or colourful populist accounts, John Ball, Leslie Stephen, Douglas Freshfield and Francis Fox Tuckett were amongst the first to draw attention to the Dolomites. Tuckett's sister, Elizabeth, an enthusiastic traveller in her own right, was a writer and accomplished artist who illustrated her *Alpine Journal* with sketches of such exploits as the ascent of the Cimon della Pale by Edward Robson Whitwell, in 1870.

In 1837, John Murray Publishers produced a guide to the Alps which mentioned the existence of the Dolomites for the first time in print. This was the spur that sent so many British mountaineers to explore the Trentino Dolomites for themselves, and also led to the founding of the Alpine Club of London, the first such alpine association in the world.

The club was founded in 1857 with the express aims of furthering a scientific study of the Alps and promoting mountaineering activities. The society's publication of a journal entitled *Peaks, Passes and Glaciers* in 1859-63 was the precursor to the *Alpine Journal*, the official mouthpiece of the association. The club members ranged from aristocrats to the monied middle classes, with a surprising number of mountaineers born into Quaker backgrounds. The costly and time-consuming nature of the alpine expeditions made this romantic lifestyle a luxury only eminent and prosperous Victorians could afford. When staying at alpine refuges and inns, the British mountaineers simply signed their names and added "AC" to denote membership of the prestigious London club.

In 1852, Dublin-born John Ball, the first President of the Alpine Club of London (now Great Britain) was credited with being the first to climb Trentino's Brenta Dolomites, using a route that is still considered the safest today. In 1864, an expedition led by the mountaineers Francis Fox Tuckett and William Douglas Freshfield (who later climbed many other Trentino peaks) crossed the Pale di San Martino group in eastern Trentino, crossing the San Martino Dolomites for the first time. This feat stunned the mountaineering world since the team crossed the Dolomites without maps or much in the way of equipment; they made do with intuition, stamina and skill. The last significant British conquest was the Cimon della Pala peak, the Matterhorn of the Dolomites, first scaled by Edward Robson Whitwell in 1870.

These rugged individualists learnt their craft on Trentino's formidable crags, conquering peaks and crossing glaciers in the interests of extending the frontiers of knowledge and pitting their wits against the elements. Although their legacy lives on in the name of mountain refuges, alpine passes, academic journals and local folk memory, the baton has passed to Italian mountaineers. Nowadays, the local Trentino guides represent the largest section within the Italian Alpine Club, and embody the alpine spirit of the region, helping to preserve the natural wilderness and to mount rescues, all the while safeguarding man's right to experience new challenges. (► *See Winter in Trentino Storyline*).

Who's Who in Early Mountaineering

The Alpine Club of Great Britain: As a founder member and first president of the club, John Ball (*see entry below*) was the force behind the venture and set the Alpine Club on its path to success. In particular, his 1852 triumph of crossing the Bocca di Brenta (at an altitude of 2,500 metres) exposed the Dolomites to the scrutiny of his peers, with public acclaim not far behind. Apart from opening up the Dolomites to further expeditions by his contemporaries, Ball's feat publicised the club and tied its fate irrevocably to the exploration of the now legendary Dolomites. The fame of the Trentino Dolomites grew as the daring exploits of the members of the Alpine Club were recorded in travel journals penned by the British mountaineers themselves. However, for these proud pioneers, the most prestigious publication remained the *Alpine Journal*, subtitled "a record of mountain adventure and scientific observation," and produced by the Alpine Club.

John Ball (1818-89) was the Dublin-born founder member who became the first President of the Alpine Club of London (now Great Britain). The inveterate mountaineer is credited with being the first to climb Trentino's Brenta Dolomites, in 1852, using a

route that is still considered the safest and most popular today. The Brenta Dolomites, situated in western Trentino, represented virgin territory and were a formidable challenge, with the climb reaching an altitude of 2,500 metres. For his ground-breaking ascent, Ball selected the Bocca di Brenta as the natural springboard for an exploration of the group. These mountains still present an impressive spectacle, with the jagged rock-face overhanging the Molveno Valley. Ball went on to accomplish numerous mountaineering exploits in Trentino, including such pioneering climbs as the crossing of the San Martino group and the Adamello Presanella group. John Ball is also credited with being the first to publicise the Trentino Dolomites, which he presented to his peers in the Alpine Club. His *Guide of the Eastern Alps* (1868), which includes a comprehensive account of the Dolomites, confirmed his status as a trailblazing mountaineer.

Charles Comyns Tucker (1843-1922) was the first mountaineer to scale Sass Maor, the summit of the Pale di San Martino, in 1875. This was considered one of the greatest challenges of the day and was recorded in the *Alpine Journal*. Together with Freshfield, one of his regular climbing partners, Tucker embarked on other mountaineering expeditions in the Alps, as well as undertaking expeditions in the Caucasus. In 1872, in the San Martino Dolomites, Tucker and Freshfield were the first to scale the Cima Vezzana, a feat recorded in the *Alpine Journal* in 1874. The mountaineers followed this with the conquest of the Catinaccio peak in the Fassa Dolomites group in 1874.

Amelia Edwards, the Victorian writer and tireless traveller, was enthralled by the mountaineering feats in the Trentino Dolomites and recounted the alpine adventures of her peers in her travel book *Untrodden Peaks and Unfrequented Valleys* (1872). She explored the Alps on horseback and was particularly daunted by the danger presented by the jagged peaks, crags and ravines of the San Martino Dolomites. Edwards was particularly taken with the towering symbol of the San Martino group, the lofty peaks of Cimon della Pale. Edwards likened it to a Pharaonic pyramid, with the peak topped by a smaller pyramid.

Francis Fox Tuckett (1834-1913), born into a Quaker family from Bristol, was the embodiment of the romantic early mountaineer and adventurer. As a tireless climber, he explored the Brenta and San Martino Dolomites in Trentino, recording 269 climbs and 687 crossings of alpine passes in his lifetime. He began climbing in the Alps in 1853 and was soon considered the most assured British climber and mountaineer of his generation. In 1864, he took part in the first expedition in the Pale di San Martino and planned to scale the Cimon della Pala peak but lost out to Whitwell in 1870. However, in the Brenta Dolomites, both Fox Tuckett and Freshfield succeeded in scaling Cima Brenta, the highest peak in the range. In 1872, during the ascent of Cima Presanella, another peak in the same group, Fox Tuckett became embroiled with a huntsman who claimed to have killed 30 brown bears and countless chamois. (Although the indigenous brown bear became extinct in the Brenta area, the bears still exist elsewhere in the Trentino Dolomites, with numbers boosted by the recent introduction of Slovenian bears).

Given his commitment to climbing expeditions, Francis Fox Tuckett turned down the Presidency of the Alpine Club, but agreed to be Vice-President (1866-68). In recognition of his role in charting, mapping and exploring the Alps in general, and much of Trentino

in particular, Francis Fox Tuckett was decorated by Victor Emanuele, the King of Italy. A more lasting memorial to Tuckett is the delightful alpine refuge named after him, Rifugio Tuckett, set above the chic resort of Madonna di Campiglio. As proof of Tuckett's stamina and insatiable appetite for life, when he died at the age of 80, he had just returned from his third round-the-world trip. **Elizabeth Fox Tuckett**, Tuckett's sister, who died young, was equally passionate about the mountains and was the first writer and illustrator to turn her alpine adventures into tales for children.

William Douglas Freshfield (1845-1934) was the only son of a wealthy banker whose family regularly holidayed in the Alps. His book, *Italian Alps: sketches in the mountains of Ticino, Lombardy, the Trentino and Venetia* describes his mountaineering expeditions in the Brenta Dolomites and the Adamello Presanella groups, mountains which were hitherto completely uncharted. In 1864 Freshfield was the first to climb the Presanella peak (3,356 metres) in the Adamello Brenta group near Madonna di Campiglio. In 1874 an expedition led by Francis Ford Tuckett and Freshfield (who later conquered many other Trentino peaks) crossed the Pale di San Martino in eastern Trentino for the first time. In 1871 he and Charles Comyns Tucker scaled Cima Brenta and a year later conquered Cima Vezzana, the highest peak in the Pale di San Martino. The pair were accompanied by a hunter who swiftly withdrew when he saw the Travignolo glacier and the daunting crevasse that blocked the mountaineers' path. Freshfield continued to lead expeditions until 1920 and was elected President of the Alpine Club (1893-95), and later became President of the Royal Geographical Society (1914-17).

Josiah Gilbert and G.C. Churchill rashly embarked on an alpine expedition which ended up by lasting three years. Their adventures are recorded in their tome entitled, *The Dolomite Mountains*. Gilbert and Churchill were inveterate mountaineers who undertook expeditions in Friuli, the South Tyrol and the Trentino Dolomites between 1861-3. The pair were also enthusiastic botanists and geologists with a literary bent who filled their journals with tales of the people, plants and peaks they encountered. Unlike many of their peers, who were motivated by the challenge of the peaks, Gilbert and Churchill were interested in all aspects of the alpine world. Given their fascination with the scientific and botanical side of alpinism, the duo tended to travel light, with little luggage and no ropes or pickaxes. Their book, *The Dolomite Mountains*, is richly observed, with descriptions of the plants, minerals, landscape and local economy, as well as the peaks themselves.

Leslie Stephen (1832-1904), an intellectual, literary critic and writer, was the father of Virginia Woolf as well as being a mountaineer. Stephen mainly explored the Pale di San Martino group and the Primiero Dolomites in eastern Trentino and achieved a number of "firsts". In 1869 Leslie Stephen climbed from Primiero to Passo di Ball, in the heart of the Pale di San Martino group, crossing the pass named in honour of John Ball (*see entry*). After exploring the San Martino Dolomites, Stephen recounted his adventures in *The Peaks of Primiero*. As President of the Alpine Club (1866-88), he published accounts of his various mountaineering expeditions in a volume entitled *Playground of Europe*. Stephen was particularly respected for his broad vision of alpinism which touched on disciplines as diverse as mythology, philosophy, ethics and human relations. He also idealised the life of a mountaineer as one of the most honourable pursuits imaginable.

Edward Robson Whitwell (1843-1922): In 1870 the mountaineer became the first to scale the Cimon della Pala peak (the Matterhorn of the Dolomites) and this exceptional feat was illustrated in Elizabeth Fox Tuckett's *Alpine Journal*. The peak, the symbol of the San Martino Dolomites, was considered unconquerable, "a forest of crags". Whitwell was also Francis Fox Tuckett's climbing partner in numerous expeditions in the Dolomites and the Italian Alps.