

H.B. DE SAUSSURE'S ELECTION INTO THE ROYAL SOCIETY

By G. R. DE BEER, F.R.S.

HORACE-BENEDICT DE SAUSSURE was elected into the Fellowship of the Royal Society on 3 April 1788. In his *Life of de Saussure*,¹ Douglas Freshfield stated that it was to his ascent of Mont Blanc, which took place on 3 August 1787, that de Saussure owed this honour. Freshfield added that Mark Beaufoy, who ascended Mont Blanc six days after de Saussure and read a paper on his ascent before the Royal Society on 13 December 1787, was more successful in attracting the Society's attention to de Saussure's claims than Sir William Hamilton had been in 1776, in which year a proposal to nominate de Saussure as a candidate bore no fruit.

Mark Beaufoy's paper was never published by the Royal Society, but appeared twenty years later, in the *Annals of Philosophy*, in 1817. It was subsequently reprinted by Freshfield in the *Alpine Journal*, volume 29. The Journal Book of the Royal Society contains an abstract of Beaufoy's paper which has never been printed, and while it contains no fresh information, its subject-matter is of sufficient interest to justify its appearance here.

(*Extract taken from the 'Journal Book of the Royal Society,'
dated 13 December 1787*)

'A Narrative of a Journey to the Summit of Mount Blanc, by Mark Beaufoy Esq. was read.

'Having collected ten guides to attend him on this expedition, Mr. Beaufoy set out from Chamouny on the 8th of August last at 7 in the Morning—in about an hour they reached the Glaciers de Boissons where the rapid ascent begins, in four hours more they came to the Glaciers de la Cote, and toward evening having traversed this

¹ London: Edward Arnold, 1920.

field of ice they came to a hut formerly built by Mons. de Saussure about midway from the Village of Chamouny to the summit of the Mountain. Here they tarried ten hours and at three the next morning they proceeded on their journey. At seven o'clock they arrived at the foot of the distinct cone which is properly denominated Mount Blanc, and at half after ten they at length with a pleasure much abated by the lassitude they felt, reached the summit which had been the object of all their labour and obstinate perseverance. The difficulties they encountered from the intense cold to which may probably be ascribed the extreme thirst and the loathing of all kinds of Victuals and spirituous liquors they experienced and from the wide and shifting chasms which frequently barred their way as also the particulars of the precautions that were taken to surmount all these difficulties are circumstantially related in the paper.

'The party remained two hours on the summit the deep azure colour of the sky, the immensity of the prospects around the view of the Valley of Chamouny which bore the appearance of a tremendous Abyss beneath, are mentioned by Our Author as having excited both his Admiration and Astonishment. At Noon he took an Observation of the Altitude of the Sun, by which he found the Latitude of this summit to be $45^{\circ}.50'$ North.

'On their descent the party passed a great part of the succeeding night in the midway hut and arrived at Chamouny the third day after their departure at 11 o'clock before noon, after having been about 52 hours, 20 of which were spent in the hut.

'Thanks were returned to Mr. Beaufoy for this Communication.'

It is presumably because of this paper given before the Society by Beaufoy on 13 December 1787 that Mlle C. E. Engel² has stated that it was Beaufoy who 'got de Saussure elected into the Royal Society.' ('Mark Beaufoy le fait recevoir Fellow de la Royal Society.') But Beaufoy was not elected into the Fellowship of the Society himself until 18 February 1790, and could not have played any such part in de Saussure's election, even if the election procedure had permitted of such action, which it did not.

² *La Suisse et ses amis*, Neuchatel, 1943, p. 130.

In point of fact, there is no necessity for any uncertainty regarding de Saussure's election, for his election certificate shows that it was signed and filed in the Society's offices not only before Beaufoy's paper was delivered, but six weeks before de Saussure's ascent of Mont Blanc. It is as follows :

(Copy of Certificate of Horace Benedict de Saussure)

' Horace Benedict de Saussure Member of the Great Council of Geneva, and of several learned Academies, and author of various celebrated works chiefly on Natural Philosophy, particularly a Treatise on Hygrometry and Travels into the Alps, being desirous of the honour of becoming a fellow of the Royal Society on the foreign List ; We the underwritten do hereby recommend him as a Gentleman of distinguished Merit, whose election we are persuaded will do credit to the Society.

Dated June 28th 1787.

G. Shuckburgh
Jas. Edd : Smith
J. A. De Luc

John Turton
Stanhope
J. de Salis
S. Harper
E. W. Gray
C. Blagden
H. Cavendish
Palmerston
Roger Wilbraham
Henry C. Englefield
Wm. Young

Tho. Bowdler
R. H. A. Bennett
Wm. Coxe

' Ballotted for & elected April 3 1788.'

It is also of interest to note that although this certificate is dated 28 June 1787, the Journal Book shows that it was read on 21 June

1787, with all the names except the last three in the right-hand column.

Of de Saussure's sponsors, most knew him personally. Alexander Aubert had been brought up in Geneva where he saw the comet of 1744. Similarly, Charles, Earl Stanhope, as Lord Mahon, had been brought up in Geneva where his father had founded an English club of which de Saussure was a member. John Turton was in Geneva in 1766 when he performed a post-mortem examination on de Saussure's father-in-law, Monsieur Boissier, who was drowned. R. H. Bennett's daughter was Madame de Saussure's cousin. Jerome de Salis was the son of the Grisons Minister to the Court of Saint James; S. Harper, librarian of the British Museum, was the colleague and predecessor of another Grison, Joseph Planta, Sec.R.S. Henry Temple, Viscount Palmerston, Sir George Shuckburgh, William Coxe and Sir James Edward Smith, had all of them known de Saussure in Switzerland. Thomas Bowdler was intimate with the Villettes family, a daughter of which had married Alphonse Turretini of Geneva. Jean-André De Luc was de Saussure's countryman.

It is therefore clear that these gentlemen, together with the Secretary of the Royal Society, Sir Charles Blagden, and Henry Cavendish, were competent to appreciate the worth of de Saussure's contributions to natural knowledge even without the glamour of his ascent of Mont Blanc. The earliest possible date for his election after the filing of his certificate was 3 April 1788, eight months after his ascent: *post hoc*, but not *propter hoc*.