

# The Life of O'Reilly.

## An account of the life and times of the climber Anthony Adams Reilly

by Kevin Higgins



*Portrait of  
Anthony Adams Reilly,  
courtesy of the Alpine Club,  
London.*

In a shaded corner of a small churchyard in Annagh, near the eastern shore of Lough Derg, stands a row of plain crosses marking burials in the Minchin family plot. One of these has the appearance of a traditional Celtic cross but closer examination shows the cross not to have the expected Celtic interwoven design patterns but is decorated instead with carved flowers and foliage, including what appears to be representations of edelweiss and gentian, the well known Alpine blooms.

The inscription commemorates Anthony Adams-Reilly, born in 1836 in Belmont, Mullingar. Belmont House is near Mullingar, close to the north shore of Lough Ennel, the waters of which, after joining the Shannon, pass through Lough Derg on their long journey to the sea. No less interesting is the life journey of Anthony Adams Reilly, from his birth in the Irish midlands, via the highest points in Western Europe to his interment near the shore of Lough Derg.

With such a surname it is not surprising that there are Co. Cavan connections. Thomas O'Reilly, was born in Roebuck, near Mountnugent, and died in 1786. His only daughter married Captain Adams of Belmont, Mullingar, who adopted the name Adams-Reilly. Their son, William, married Frances Helen Auchmuty from Co. Longford. They were the parents of Anthony Miles William Adams Reilly, born on the 11th February in 1836. He had three younger siblings, two sisters and a brother who died young. In the course of a few generations the O' was lost and substantial property gained in Cavan and Westmeath.<sup>1</sup>

Little information is available on Anthony's childhood. He was a young boy during the Great Famine but there is no record of how much it impinged on his life. The leading edge of transport technology was at his doorstep. The Royal Canal had been constructed and was within a mile or so of his house. The railway, in its push westwards from Dublin, had come to Mullingar in 1845 and provided relatively easy access to Britain and the rest of Europe.



*Belmont House, Mullingar.*

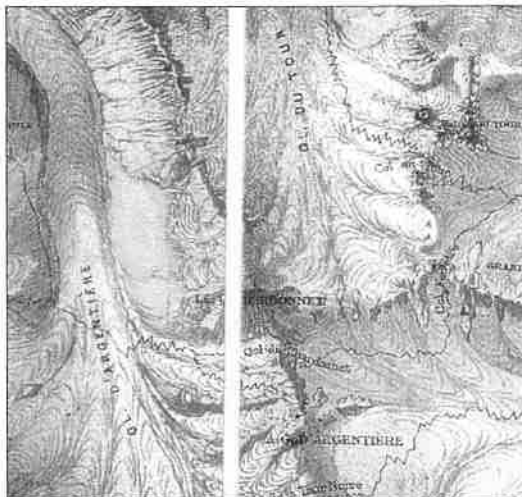
*Photo: Michael Duffy*

His father died prematurely in 1848 and fairly soon after this Anthony was sent away to boarding school. He was registered at Rugby School, Warwickshire, in February 1850 under Housemaster Theodore Walrond.<sup>2</sup> Life at Rugby must have been a profound change for Anthony having come from Mullingar in the heart of rural Ireland. There was much emphasis on learning by heart; vast tracts of Greek and Latin poetry along with the works of English poets were committed to memory. Mathematics, Geography, History (ancient and modern), Modern Languages, Natural Philosophy and Drawing were taught. In the winter months, boys rose at 7 a.m. for breakfast at 7.30 and school at eight. In summer, the days began at 6.30 with one and a half hours of school before breakfast at 8.30, followed by three hour-long lessons in the morning and two in the afternoon.

Discipline in Rugby School was strict but not inhuman. 'Six of the best' – half a dozen blows of a cane on the hand, being the consequence of 'gross and frequent inattention in class'. Flogging – the use of the birch – was administered occasionally and was the prerogative of the headmaster alone. Certain senior boys, prepostors or prefects, were responsible for more general discipline and their duty was to 'put down ill practices of every kind such as frequenting of public houses, turbulent conduct, drinking and smoking'. 'Fagging' was the lot of younger boys in such schools. This meant in effect being a servant to the senior students. It could take a variety of forms such as cooking, making tea, even standing in goal at football or fielding at cricket. Various forms of bullying also took place in the school along with a range of bizarre initiation rites.<sup>3</sup>



*Detail of Adams Reilly's map showing Mt. Blanc*



Detail of Adams Reilly's map showing Aig du Chardonnet

Such was the school life undertaken by Anthony for about five years at a cost to his family of about £16.5s.6d annually, along with, usually, another ten guineas in tutors' fees. In Ireland, at about this time, a farm labourer was paid about 6d (one fortieth of a pound) for a day's work.<sup>4</sup>

During his time at Rugby there are two factors that are acknowledged to have had an important influence on Reilly's later life. One was the reading of *'Travels through the Alps of Savoy'* by James David Forbes.<sup>5</sup> This was an account of his travels by a professor at Edinburgh University, a scientist who had studied the glaciers of the Alps and had proposed a theory of glacial motion. The other was the influence of Rugby's Drawing Master, George Barnard. He had been travelling

regularly to the Alps and as early as 1841 had carried out a long Alpine tour.<sup>6</sup> He used his own sketches and paintings of mountain scenery and landforms to illustrate his course of lectures on drawing. In his book, *Drawing from Nature*, he mentions Reilly, a former pupil, and 'one who possesses so much power in using his pencil . . . an example of what can be done with it even by an enthusiastic climber.'<sup>7</sup>

The Alpine Club was founded in London in 1857, its first president being the Dublin man John Ball. From about then until the first ascent of the Matterhorn, in 1865, may be regarded as the 'Golden Age of Mountaineering'. The growing phenomenon that was 'Alpinism' had been formalised by the foundation of such a club. It had strict membership requirements relating to personal achievements in climbing and it drew its members largely from the professional classes and the well educated.<sup>8</sup> The motivation which inspired the interest in mountaineering varied greatly; from the spiritual – being in the midst of awe inspiring natural environment, to the scientific – studying the phenomena of light, sound or the movement of glaciers. Businessmen may simply have felt the need of an invigorating break from the rigours of a busy business life. It was likely to have been at university that many of the Alpine Club members were introduced to the activity of mountaineering.

Anthony Adams Reilly matriculated to Brase-nose College, Oxford in 1855. There is no record of his graduation but it is likely that his interest in mountaineering was further encouraged while at university. His first recorded visit to the Alps was in 1861 when he made a number of ascents along with the Rev. Leslie Stephen. He went on that season to make two ascents of Mt. Blanc and in a letter to *The Times* he wrote a comparison of the two routes.<sup>9</sup>

With the qualifying climbs of that season he was accepted as a member of the Alpine Club in the spring of 1862 and in the following summer made a third ascent of Mt. Blanc by another route. While crossing the Col d'Argentière his party found that there were many anomalies in the maps then in use. The heights of the peaks and the extent of the glaciers were inaccurately drawn. Even some non-existent ridges and summits were shown. Reilly decided to take it upon himself to remedy the situation. He was encouraged to do so



*View of Aig du Chardonnet  
and features names for A-R (as indicated).*

at the Mer De Glace he set up a total of twenty triangulation stations which were used to determine the location of some 200 points over a distance of some fifty miles. Details of the intervening terrain he completed with numerous sketches that he later incorporated into the final document. The work required quite a bit of climbing and exploration, which continued throughout July and August of 1863.<sup>10</sup>

During the following winter the map was constructed from the survey results and sketches. The manuscript was then presented to the Alpine Club. This was an 'entirely original map . . . the first which exhibited the great peaks of the chain in their proper positions'.<sup>11</sup> It was resolved to publish the map but before doing so Reilly felt that some areas needed revision, particularly the western face of Mt. Blanc ' . . . which I had been obliged to leave blank, speckled over with unmeaning dots of rock, gathered from previous maps' as he said.<sup>12</sup>

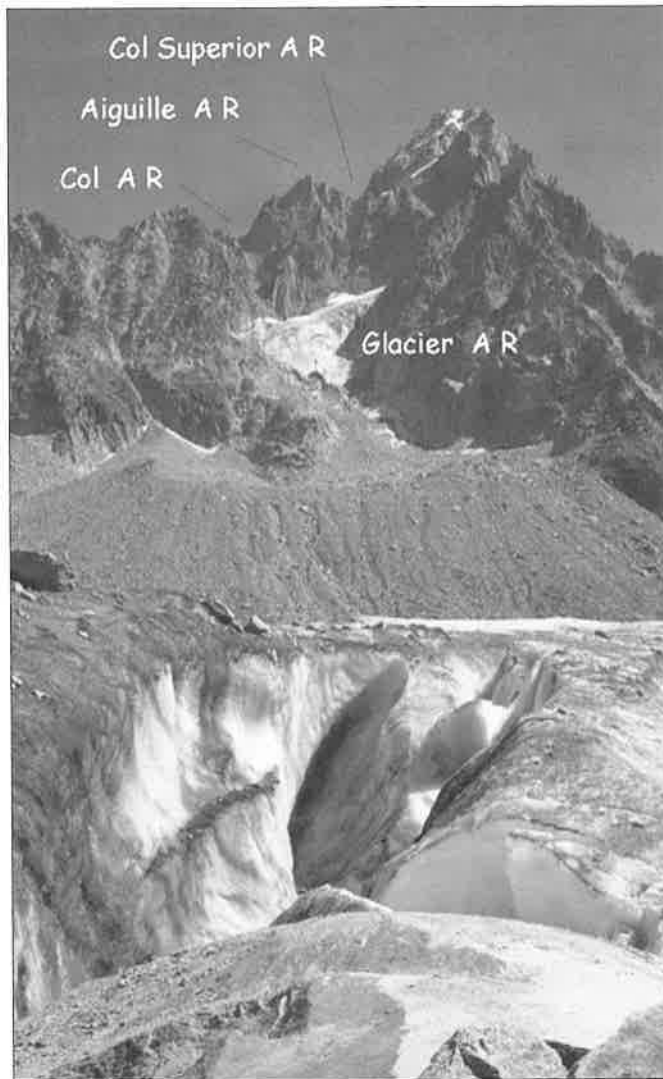
The Matterhorn is possibly the most recognised mountain in Europe, if not in the world, largely because of its distinctive shape. Edward Whymper is renowned as the first man to have reached its summit, which he did in 1865. The prestige attached to making a first ascent or to opening a new unclimbed route was considerable, as it remains today among climbers and moun-



*Looking across Glacier du Tour  
towards the A-R features (as indicated)*

during the winter of 1862/3 when he met Professor J.D. Forbes, the author of *Travels through the Alps of Savoy*. Forbes had already made a map, in 1842, of Mt. Blanc's main glacier, the Mer de Glace. He had worked extensively in the region studying the movement of glaciers and was enthusiastic about Reilly's plans.

The survey of 'the Chain of Mt. Blanc' began in 1863 when Reilly arrived in Chamonix in late June. Using a baseline accurately measured by Forbes



*Looking across Glacier d'Argentiere  
towards the A-R features (as indicated)*

taineers. He had made numerous earlier, unsuccessful attempts and in 1864 he felt that Adams Reilly, being a man 'of wonderful determination and perseverance' would make a suitable climbing companion for another summit bid. The invitation was issued and gladly accepted by Reilly, but only on condition that Whymper would assist on the revision survey of Mt. Blanc.<sup>13</sup> Thus it came about that Reilly was climbing along with the leading mountaineer of the day throughout the first half of July 1864. Together they made a number of significant first ascents (Mt. Dolent, Aiguille de Trelatête, Aiguille d'Argentière) and new routes. Having completed the revision survey they went on to Zermatt, Switzerland, to complete the other part of the agreement, an attempt on the Matterhorn by the previously unexplored route of the Hörnli Ridge. A letter awaited Whymper in Zermatt calling him back to London to deal with business matters, he was an engraver by profession, and Reilly didn't attempt the climb but returned to Chamonix to continue climbing with other partners.<sup>14</sup>

This turn of events may have precluded Reilly from being

among the pantheon of world famous mountaineers, since Whymper went on to reach the summit by that same route in the following year.

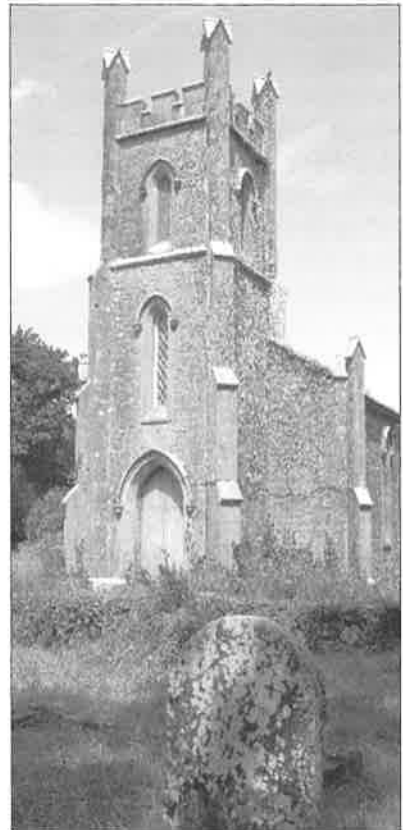
The map, entitled *The Chain of Mont Blanc*, was published by the Alpine Club in 1865 using a scale of 1:80,000. At about the same time the French government produced a map of the same region at a scale of 1:40,000. During his own survey work Reilly had met the French cartographers under Capt. Mieulet and had given them valued assistance in their work. The result was that a number of topographical features were named to commemorate the work of the Irishman. To this day the French maps display Aiguille Adams Reilly (3506m), Col. Adams Reilly (3365m), Col Superior Adams Reilly (3478m), Glacier Adams Reilly and Signal Reilly (2883m)<sup>15</sup> all located near the Aiguille du Chardonnet and

Aiguille d'Argentière, the latter of which Reilly and Whymper made the first ascent in 1864.

Reilly's map was produced using the process of chromo lithography, a method of printing using chemicals to apply colour to a stone plate, each colour requiring a separate run through the printing press. This production method may have been one of its flaws for a contemporary critique claimed that 'a map of high class ought not to be executed in chromo-lithography'.<sup>16</sup> The French production also had flaws and the critic concluded that '... however far either or both may fall short of perfection, they are at least sufficiently accurate in almost every spot for all practical purposes'.

The following year, 1865, Reilly was back in the Alps working on a new survey of the Monte Rosa area in northern Italy. This was a fateful year in the history of Alpinism, for in descending from the summit of the Matterhorn after making the first ascent, four of Whymper's party of seven fell to their deaths. The tragedy aroused great controversy and debate, which continues to the present day. Reilly, surveying in northern Italy, heard the tragic news of the Matterhorn accident and made his way forthwith to Zermatt with the intention of being of help and comfort to his friend, Whymper. Before returning to London he wrote an account of the occurrences to Forbes, proclaiming that 'I have not the spirits to begin to break new and difficult ground, and I hate the sight of these bloodstained mountains'. This letter is one of the earliest surviving accounts of the events following the Matterhorn tragedy.<sup>17</sup>

Despite his apparent disenchantment he completed his map the following year and for the next twenty years this was to be the definitive map of the southern side of Monte Rosa. He also had time, in 1866, to make a number of first ascents, mainly along with C.E. Mathews.<sup>18</sup> He didn't return to the Alps until 1869 and between 1868 and 1871 he lived at Belmont, Mullingar. It was in that year (1871) that the 'Westmeath Act' was passed at Westminster in an effort to stem the numerous 'outrages' against landlords that were particularly prevalent in the midland counties.<sup>19</sup> The next ten years were spent in London during which time he became a student of the Inner Temple, one of the four Inns of Court which have the exclusive right to call candidates to practice law at the bar of England and Wales. He was not subsequently called to the bar but life in London must have been congenial to him since he was a keen lover of the arts, and particularly of the theatre.<sup>20</sup> In 1874 he was offered the Presidency of the Alpine Club as a result of his eminent service and popularity but, to wide regret, he declined the honour, 'modestly feeling that his powers as a speaker and as a president were inadequate for the position'.<sup>21</sup> He had already been elected an honorary member of the Swiss Alpine Club (1867) and in 1875 was similarly honoured by the French Alpine Club (CAF).<sup>22</sup>



*The church at Annagh*



*Minchin gravestones in Annagh Churchyard, nearest being A-R's*

When, in 1881, he returned to Ireland to 'dwell among his own people', it seems that he had disposed of his property in Westmeath for he took up residence in Delgany, Co Wicklow. His health may have deteriorated by this time for when his climbing partner of old, C.E. Mathews, visited he found that 'he suffered greatly from rheumatism and other ailments . . . it was sad to see a man with a constitution so strong . . . coming downstairs with difficulty with the aid of two sticks . . . with as much labour . . . as going along a difficult arête in a gale of wind'.<sup>23</sup>

While on a visit to Dublin he suffered a stroke on the 14th April 1885 and died the next day. It seems that his Mullingar connections had been severed by this time and his sister had married Falkiner Minchin (in 1858) of Annagh, which may explain why he was interred in the Minchin plot in Annagh churchyard.<sup>24</sup>

Anthony Adams Reilly was held in high esteem and affection by his friends; 'his bright, loyal and affectionate nature endeared him to all who knew him'.<sup>25</sup> His 'personality was irresistible; his unselfishness was proverbial; his work was the service of his friends'.<sup>26</sup> In the Alpine centre of Chamonix he was well known and liked since he had employed many of the local guides in his mountain expeditions. When walking up the valley 'almost every man, woman and child we met had a pleasant smile for him and a "Bon soir, M Reilly"'.<sup>27</sup> Whymper recounts the occasion when crossing a high col their party was engulfed in dense mist which prevented any progress. He fretted and raged with impatience while Reilly, on the other hand, became engrossed in a cheap novel and whiled away the time with equanimity.<sup>28</sup> On his passing C.E Mathews felt that 'some greenness were gone out of the grass and some light out of the sky. I never once heard him say anything to anyone's disparagement or pass an unjust judgement upon a single human being'.<sup>29</sup>

Mathews, Reilly's old friend and climbing partner attended the funeral at Annagh, where ' . . . sleeps in peace the outward form that once contained one of the sweetest souls ever given to the sons of men'.<sup>30</sup> It is most likely that it was the same Alpine Club friends and climbing partners who arranged the placing of the memorial – 'this stone was erected by old friends who knew him well and loved him dearly'.<sup>31</sup>

When next hiking or climbing in the Tipperary hills and mountains spare a thought for this pioneering mountaineer who lies in peace beneath the Tipperary soil.

Thanks to:

The Alpine Club Library, London.

Rusty McLean, Archivist, Rugby School, Warwickshire;

Michael Duffy, Mullingar; for Belmont photo.

Jack Bergin, Waterford, for facilitation of the mountain photos.

*All photos by Kevin Higgins unless otherwise stated*



*Detail of Adams Reilly headstone*

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31. Gravestone inscription, Annagh Churchyard.