

Ascent of Öräfajökull

Sveinn Pálsson

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THE GLACIER BOOK OF SVEINN PÁLSSON

Sveinn Pálsson did glaciological research in Iceland in the years 1792-1794 after academic studies in Copenhagen. In 1795, he sent a manuscript of a treatise on Icelandic glaciers in Danish to the Society of Natural History in Copenhagen. For a variety of reasons it was not printed in full until 1945 and then only in an Icelandic version (Pálsson, 1945). The “Glacier Book” is “the culmination of a glaciology which may be called Icelandic in the sense that it was principally based on knowledge of Icelandic glaciers” (Thorarinsson, 1960).

One of the most noteworthy chapters in the “Glacier Book” is the description of Pálsson’s ascent of Öräfajökull where he became convinced that his previous ideas of the plastic motion of glacier ice, were correct, when he observed the regular pattern of ogives on Hrutárjökull or Fjallsjökull. That idea had not been published before, except in the works of the French naturalist A. C. Bordier in 1775 (Bordier, 1775). That piece of writing also lay obscure for almost a century before being revealed to the glaciological community.

Flosi Björnsson, farmer at Kvísker, studied the route supposedly taken by Pálsson (Fig. 1) and found a cairn and Pálsson’s initial “P” engraved on a rock close to the glacier (Björnsson, 1957, 1965).

EXCERPT FROM THE “GLACIER BOOK”

Here follows an excerpt from *A Physical, Geographical, and Historical Description of Iceland’s Glaciers on the Basis of a Journey to the Most Promi-*

nent of Them in 1792-1794 (Including Four Plan and [Eight] Perspective Drawings) by Sveinn Pálsson. Translated into English by Björn Netland and edited, with annotations (endnotes), by Richard S. Williams, Jr. and Oddur Sigurðsson.

Ascent of Öräfajökull

On 11 August [1794] we were already well underway long before sunrise with our intention of climbing Öräfajökull; the weather was quite calm, without a cloud in the sky. Eggert Ólafsson¹ considered Öräfajökull to be the highest mountain in Iceland. Equipped with a barometer, thermometer, pocket compass, pickaxe, glacier cane, and a length of rope measuring eight fathoms, my two companions and I set out from the abandoned Kvísker farmstead at 0545 hr after having indicated our destination on a piece of paper that we fastened to our tent, in case we should get lost on the glacier. We made our way up rather steep foothills and finally reached the margin of the glacier at 0845 hr, where we rested on a hill for a few minutes. At the foot of this hill, we observed a few plants of the beautiful alpine species *Ranunculus nivalis* [*corr. Ranunculus glacialis* (mountain buttercup)] growing on the barren gravel; a few of them had even shed their blossoms. The ones that had just bloomed had snowy-white petals, but the large ones had saffron-yellow and later [stage of the blooming cycle] red ones. I had not come across this species of plant before in the mountains of the southern districts. At this location, it grows at a higher altitude than *Statice armeria* [*Armeria maritima* (thrift)], which had still not started blossoming here, and even higher up than the little *Salix herbacea* [least willow], which, however, usually grows in the highest location and is second only to lichens [that grow at the highest eleva-