Mont-aux-Sources, two French missionaries, and the ascent that never happened

Thomas Wimber

In climbing parlance the rewards of the summit assault and final steps 'into thin air' are mentally satisfying and hopefully visually pleasing, moreover if the climb is a first ascent and establishes itself in august written testimony. Consider this pioneering triumph after a long slog through unknown territory:

> *Strange echoes were heard in April 1836 as two devout French missionaries . . . . T. Arbousset and F. Daumas stood at the edge of the [Drakensberg] Escarpment and looked down in utter amazement as they watched the waters of the Tugela crashing down to the gorge below. Realizing the geographic importance of the mountain, they named it Mont-aux-Sources.* (Dodds, 1975, p 20)

Dramatic enough. So dramatic that this episode has passed from mountain lore into commonly accepted fact. Unfortunately this theatrical depiction of Drakensberg trailblazing is entirely fiction. Neither missionary stood anywhere close to the edge of what today is called the Amphitheatre atop Royal Natal National Park. Besides getting the ascent wrong, the 'geography books [of South Africa] have told us ever since we were out of knickerbockers that the Orange River rises in the Mont-aux-Sources (MAS), likewise the Caledon and the Tugela. But there is evidently a geographic as well as poetic license to be reckoned with, and when they said so, they meant just there or thereabouts' (Openshaw AH and ER Blackburn, 1908 in *JMCSA* 1963, p 24). This pinnacle of hallowed ground has suffered from at least three historical inaccuracies: (1) from Anderson, 'It is believed that MAS was regarded as the highest point [in the Drakensberg], but as time progressed . . . , this point has moved steadily southwards . . . coming to rest for good at Thabana Ntlenyana' (1959, p 4)'; (2) it was a vexing source of the Orange River but finally pinpointed many kilometers south by Moteane (1888) and Clarke (1888, p522); and most enduringly (3) the 'first ascent' of MAS which is today still persistently and puzzlingly attached to these two French Protestant missionaries. For those who enjoy non-fiction with a captivating story, that tells the thrill and adventure of men and their mountains, that carries gravitas and the weight of history supported with real facts, this scrutiny of what happened (the truth) should appeal. Time is long overdue to set the record straight. And we no longer wear 'knickerbockers'.

Firstly, however, other obnubilatory accounts of this Drakensberg 'first ascent' in the South African press (as beclouding as the very mists themselves) abound and are equally inventive. One must troll through their pages to realize that this is no minor mentioning, but a profligate, supposedly irrefragable, mountaineering climacteric. Consider the roll call of tendentious excerpts:

- Reg Pearse creates excess in his magnum opus, *Barrier of Spears*, insisting Arbousset and Daumas 'gazed down in awe over the tremendous battlemented cliffs of what we call today the Amphitheatre' (Pearse, 1974, p 44). Nothing could be farther from the truth.
- 'In 1836, two French missionaries . . . succeeded in penetrating the Drakensberg from the north. While searching for the headwaters of the Orange and Caledon rivers, they . . . arrived at the summit of the blue mountains, which they named Mont-aux-Sources . . . '(Leibenberg, 1972, 150).
- In Bristow (1985, p 227) we read: 'The first modern exploration of the Drakensberg was undertaken in 1836 by two French missionaries of the Paris Mission Society who journeyed across "the Roof of Africa" . . . as far as Mont-aux-Sources and the grand Amphitheatre panorama'. They did not travel together near the mountains at all.
- TV Bulpin (1970, p 602) recounts how two French missionaries ' . . . reached the edge of the Drakensberg cliffs at the plateau summit known to the Sothos (*sic*) as Phofung (place of the eland). The missionaries soon realized that they had found one of the natural wonders of South Africa . . . .'
- The pages of the *JMCSA* are not impervious to soluble recasting: 'In 1836 while exploring the mountain wilderness . . . T. Arbousset and F. Daumas arrived at the edge of the Escarpment . . .' (Wheeler, *JMCSA*, 1969, p 3).
- Liebenberg again: 'They traversed the Malutis on horseback and arrived at the summit of the blue mountains, which they aptly named Mont-aux-Sources' (JMCSA, 1989, p 36).
- Perhaps one of the earliest miscasts in the popular press comes from Burman (1966, p61) in *A Peak to Climb*: 'Here the good missionaries arrived at their goal; at the extreme north of the chain of Blue Mountains, and forming its culminating point, they found a mountain who summit was a plateau covered with rich grass. This peak they named "Mont-aux-Sources". .'

The above quotations are rather fantasy than actual history; it appears that the 'facts' of this non-event once published become parroted in the popular press - and now online - where MAS and these 2 French missionaries are juxtaposed. Yet, as one author adroitly states: 'one should not claim for [Arbousset] more than he claims himself' (Brutsch, 1968, p 52). In fact Arbousset did write his account of this 1836 peregrination over the top of present day northern Lesotho to the NE Free State and back and does **not** claim anywhere that he reached the summit of MAS. What he did do was add a new (and singular) French namesake to Drakensberg geography, putting 'Mont-aux-Sources' literally on his map for the first time[1] and perked the interests of the Geographical Society

[1] Carte pour servie a l'intelligence de la Relation d'un voyage d'exploration au nord-est de la colonie du cap de bonne-esperance , *Journal des Missions Evangeliques*, 1836.

which led to official recognition of the discovery of MAS. However, judging by the lengthy spawn of modern authors giving he and Daumas climbing credits, it looks as if literary excess, lack of proper research, and public clamoring for Drakensberg 'Everlasting Greats' (Art Publishers, no date) drafted these 2 French Missionaries as climbers, for example, the 'Party Participating in First Recorded Ascent; Class A: MAS from Plateau' (Liebenberg, 1972, p 150) and reinforced online such as: http://www.peakware.com/peaks.html? pk=183. Through erudition this article seeks to debouch (an apt French word) the record and hopefully end the perpetration of this delightfully conceived, but illusory, Drakensberg ascent.

Noting the above repetitive depictions that did **not** occur, it would be responsible historiography to demonstrate what actually **did** occur. Arbousset's official account is a weighty title of seeming diffident ambulation: *Relation d'un voyage d'exploration au nord-est de la colonie du cap de bonne-esperance, entrepris par les missionaries T. Arbousset et F. Daumas dans les mois de mars , d'avril et de mai, 1836* ('Narrative of an exploratory tour to the north-east of the colony of the Cape of Good Hope, undertaken by the missionaries T. Arbousset and F. Daumas in the months of March, April and May 1836'), which alludes to nothing of the significance of ascending to, and discovering, a (the) Mont-aux-Sources[2]. The English translation was done by the Rev John Croumbie Brown and published as *Narrative of an exploratory tour to the north-east of the colony of the Cape of Good Hope* in 1846 and 1852, while most accessible as a Struik reprint (Cape Town, 1968). From the narrative the reader can discover most of the route which took 'two months less two days', the two French missionaries departing from Morija to reach Merabing near Ficksberg by ox wagon. There they switched to horseback until near Butha-Buthe, Daumas returned to Merebing and Arbousset proceeded solely with his guide Monaile (Arbousset, 1968, p64).

One of the main objectives of our excursion was ' . . . to scale the highest summits of the Blue Mountains' (Arbousset, 1846, p 62) which he failed to do. Moreover, it is misleading to consider it a mountain journey as he followed the western bank of the Caledon (on the Free State side), probably through Monontsa Pass to Witsies Hoek or Phuthadijchaba (Qwa Qwa) to end up 'about 8 o'clock [pm] on the banks of the river Namagari' (Namahadi) where they passed the night hungry, cold, fatigued and in fear of the 'Bamakakana, a cannibal nation (*ibid*, p 64). With no mention of approaching any summit, Arbousset's last day on the Namahadi and several kilometers from the mountains reads most disappointingly:

> *We arose in the morning more dead than alive, mounted our horses and pursued our journey in the Blue Mountains* (sic)*; but as our tour presents no remarkable incident, we shall not trouble the reader to follow us through it, we shall simply give a summary of the results of our observations* (Arbousset, 1968, pp 64-5).

Not only is there no ascent, but note that Daumas is nowhere in the vicinity.

Dr. RC Germond, who compiled, translated and published the letters and accounts of the first French Protestant missionaries into a *vade mecum* of early life, called *Chronicles of Basutoland*, had concerns about Arbousset's version and it is worth quoting at length:

> *From his own account of the journey, we are left in doubt as to whether he actually reached his destination or not. His description of Phofung, which he most appropriately renamed Mont-aux-Sources is both disappointing and unconvincing. Surely, if Arbousset had reached the actual summit which, incidentally, **he does not claim to have done*** (emphasis added)*, he would have been so vividly impressed with the grandeur of the scene, that his description would have gone down to posterity. Instead, his account ends with disconcerting abruptness on the banks of the Namahali (Elands River). Hunger, cold, and lassitude are partly responsible for this . . .* (Germond, 1967, p 27).

Again, note the dénouement before there is even a climax (i.e., summit) and again Daumas is nowhere in sight.

Arbousset's *Narrative* (1968, pp 70-1) notes in Chapter IX how:

> *'. . . one of the objects of our tour was to trace the upper streams of some of the principal rivers of South Africa. No European traveler had yet penetrated to the sources of these rivers . . . .We have had the satisfaction to explore some of these sources ourselves . . . we have gathered so many particulars in our interviews with the natives . . . Short and imperfect as our investigation may have been, we have satisfied ourselves that the rivers of which we are about to speak, the Caledon, the Orange, the Namagari, and some other streams of less note [Tugela?], take their rise in a mountain that the natives call Pofung . . . but which we have designated in our map by the name of Mont-aux-Sources.'*

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[2] *Contrast Arbouosset's title with that of Jobo Moteane's straightforward, but fitting, headline that captures not only the importance of what he saw during his official accompaniment with the Resident Commissioner, Sir Marshal Clarke, in October 1887 during a tour of eastern Basutoland, but is the first published account confirming the source of the Senqu (Orange) River (as **not** MAS) entitled 'Leeto la go ea motloling oa Senku' or 'A journey to the source of the Senqu' (Leselinyana la Lesotho, 1888). Arbousset gives no such entitling importance to his so-called ascent and/or discovery.*

His use of the term 'designated' is not quite the take-charge, conquer and climb action verb one might expect from climbing a mountain of this significance. And Arbousset did not ascend to this summit plateau if he assures the reader that these 4 or more rivers originate from a single mountain, MAS. The sources of the Caledon and Namagari are in fact some 23km apart, separated by a summit ridge which is the watershed between tributaries of the Vaal and Orange. MAS is today applied to the highest mountain at the SE end of this ridge, whereas Arbousset described it as 'about 20 miles in circumference at the base' (1968, p 71) so he is not writing from personal observation. If Arbousset was following the Caledon, he would have neared its source on the NW end, where 3 of the 4 watersheds meet on a mountain called Thaba-Putsoa (also called Mechachaneng)[3]. Official maps as late as 1903 continued to show no distinction between Thaba Putsoa and MAS, essentially triangulating the top of Lesotho to a single point where all the rivers originate. Only with Dobson's map of 1910 (Military Report on Basutoland vol. 2) were these two summits separated on a map and noted: 'Two miles SE of the [Namahadi] pass is the peak of MAS . . . and from its immediate vicinity rise the Tugela, Elands River, and Orange river (Khubidu, Letlohalatse, and Pilatsueu Streams).' It also states that from Namahadi Pass a "track proceeds N along E edge of watershed for 2 miles. At this point a small and little-used path leaves NNW for Machachaneng, 25 miles NW', establishing once and for all the northern geography from Dobson's personal experience.

It is important to recognize that a great deal of what Arbousset describes in his *Narrative* was in fact 'interviews with the natives', whether gleaning topographical information or making cultural descriptions: 'We have a refugee Matlapatlapa named Mumpo . . . It is from him we derive the following details of the history of his tribe' (Arbousset, 1968, p 76). He states that the '. . . eastern side of the Blue Mountains presents a multitude of terraces which, gradually descending; terminate in the shores of the Indian Ocean' (*ibid*, p 67). He was never in his life in Natal, Durban, the Midlands or 'Zululand', or even the Drakensberg so this is clearly what he has learned or been told. On p 67 he also tells us ' . . .from May till August, the summit of the Malutis is covered with snow', a pardonable exaggeration but not from experience (he was never atop the Malutis during the snow season). Arbousset spends pages describing what he knows about, e.g, the MAS rivers, adding 3rd person details: The Orange. . 'comes gushing from the earth' (*ibid*, p 73) then he goes on about the tributaries it receives through Lesotho, about its hydrology, its history ('The Dutch farmers named it the Great River, and colonel Gordon gave it the name of the Orange River', *ibid*, p 73), even noting ' . . .a fine hot spring on the right bank of the stream, in the Buffalo Vley . . . . (*ibid*, p 74), which is likely Aliwal North. His descriptions contain wildlife which he did not see ' . . attacks of lions, hyenas and panthers' (*ibid*, p 65). 'The native travellers tell us that it [Letuele River, i.e., Tugela] . . . shelters hippopotami and crocodiles . . . .' (*ibid*, p 75). Contrast this when Arbousset actually **does** have a first person encounter in his *Narrative*: . . .we discovered on our right hand a chain of rocks . . . that, seen from a distance, they seemed like a fortification . . . . The rock Lefiking . . . struck me above all the others by its grand and imposing appearance' (*ibid*, pp 62-63). His descriptions fit neatly with the area of Golden Gate – Qwa Qwa and the rock is, according to Germond in 1968 (p 32, note) a 'conspicuous natural feature still known as *lefika* in the Witzies Hoek Reserve.' A careful reading indicates what he actually encounters through his eye-witness, first person versions, and what he merely exlplains to inform the reader.

Assuming the best of intentions from a modest man, a missionary of liberal values and wide education with dedicated values, that honest attempts were made to pursue the *Narrative* stated aims, then it is worth pursuing if Arbousset actually stood on the edge of the escarpment. One might ask that if Arbousset had in fact reached the top of MAS, he would never have failed to describe in the appropriate words that magnificent view one obtains and is consistent in the travel/historical literature. He surely would have walked to the edge where the Tugela leads one inexorably to see the breathtaking drop of the river (as one of the highest waterfalls in the world). This article has established that he recorded no such beauty or superlatives. Arbousset's practical ennui and unremarkable observations could not be more at variance with the veritable unswerving written consistency of the drama and pronouncement the Drakensberg invites from a host of independent sources at most any timeframe in the recorded 19th and 20th centuries.

The *JMCSA* is rife with such emotional embellishment: 'The [1929] views from the Amphitheatre Wall, over what seemed to be the whole of Natal and into the blue haze of distance, were indescribably beautiful . . . a most unforgettable and glorious scene' (Ridgway, 1980, p 48). In 1952, Stanley Rose (p 22) in his *JMCSA* account from MAS 'had the feeling of being on top of the world. For miles undulating ridges stretched away into Basutoland to the SE, S and SW . . . Hours could be spent drinking in the beauty of the scene.' *'Three weeks in the Drakensberg'* (Cooke, 1917, p 24), a gallivanting romp with friends had good luck with the weather: 'Fortunately as we approached the summit the mist began to break, and we had a glorious view of the huge amphitheatre of the Tugela . . . . On the Tugela side the edge partakes of the nature of a huge cornice, projecting well over the great abyss between Sentinel Peak and Mon-Aux-Sources. The drop into this ravine cannot be far short of three thousand feet.'[4] Even the lugubrious sense of humor typified by the police patrol along the top of the Drakensberg in 1908 (*supra*, *JMCSA*, 1963, p 24) could not fail to describe from the MAS surroundings at the end of their 11 day trek that '. . .Mopedi's track . . . suddenly dived down through the krantzes by the Namahadi Pass, down 3000 feet by zig-zag curves to the warmth and comfort of the sunny hollows below.'

And finally, a remarkable hike to the MAS area from the interior of Basutoland in 1898, possibly the first European to (do and) record such, hiking the watershed ridge from the Caledon to the top of Machachaneg and over to MAS – and back – noted:

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[3] The Orange River referred to is actually the Malibamatso, which drains into the Senqu (Orange) River further down. The Khubedu and Senqu Rivers were not at the time known to Arbousset.

*[4] Liebenberg, 1975, curiously uses this article to "prove" MAS was first ascended by Arbousset and Daumas, but it merely says on page 26 that 'The French missionaries of Basutoland, who were familiar with the range as far back as 1833, well **named** the chain Mont-Aux-Sources.' (emphasis added)*

Suddenly, on making a sharp turn, the [Tugela] river disappeared at our feet, and before us lay a sight I shall never forget. We were standing on the brink of a vast semi-circular sweep of cliff where the MAS plateau breaks off suddenly in a sheer fall of thousands of feet into Natal. The stern grandeur of the time-worn precipices contrasting with the tender green of the valley far below made a most entrancing picture. The great wall of rock assumes all sorts of fantastic shapes. Vast buttresses jut out into the valley, looking like old-time castles with ruined towers, or some weather-beaten cathedral with soaring spires and minarets (Fairclough, 1899,pp 32-3).

Would this have been the description that Arbousset would set down into history were it true he ever ascended MAS?

It is not necessary to plough through all the documented literature describing an endless succession of visitors encountering where the plateau of Basutoland/Lesotho ends in the most remarkable and abrupt fashion to plunge into the vorago all along the South African watershed border. Yet one last account would seem to hold true that no matter who recorded, no matter when it was recorded, and no matter where it was recorded, the Drakensberg Escarpment vigorously and consistently never fails to inspire. In fact two other French Protestant missionaries, Francois Le Bihan and A Hidien, who completed the first recorded trans-Lesotho trip in 1867 starting from Roma and ending at the Escarpment, detailed from their diaries the climax of their journey and established without a doubt that even peers of religious persuasion, on a similar path-finding exploratory tour, could evoke the grandest superlatives: 'Excitedly he ran towards his companions shouting: "the mountain is moving! The mountain is moving! . . . Come quick and see". At that height they were above the clouds and, what had seemed like an endless stretch of mountains was in reality clouds and mist hugging he mountain slope. . . . As they stood there transfixed, a light wind sprang up dispersing clouds and mist, and as the sun rose they looked down the pass . . . the much famed Sani. This was Natal! . . . their goal and the end of their labours! (de Jesus, *JMCSA* 1977)[5]. It is certain that Arbousset never stood on such a precipice.

A final piece of evidence from academia should end this brocade of popularized MAS 'ascents' and supersede scholarship over *de trop* examinations. Unknown until recently, Arbousset undertook another extensive journey in 1840, four years after his *Voyage d'Exploration,* and even more so, he wrote a book of that trip in French but a combination of circumstances prevented its publication at the time. Over a century later the manuscript reemerged from Arbousset's descendants and scholars who gained sight of it recognized its significance. It was only translated, edited and published in Lesotho in 1991 as *Missionary Excursion into the Blue Mountains being an account of King Moshoeshoe's expedition from Thaba-Bosiu to the sources of the Malibamatso River in the year 1840* (ed. Ambrose and Brutsch). It opens further insights into the MAS discovery, in fact helping to dispel its mythical 'ascent' with Arbousset's own words: 'At the time of my first journey to Mont-aux-Sources [in 1836], I was particularly disappointed not to have seen the headwaters of the Orange River, at the very time when I was only a few leagues distant. I promised myself to return there one day if circumstances were favorable . . .' (1991, p 51). When informed of this plan, King Moshoeshoe I accompanied him. They crossed the front range of the Maloti at modern day Moteng Pass and reached as far inland atop what is known as Mahlasela (above the Afriski resort). As for ascending MAS, he fell short once more.

His 1840 account states: 'Finally, we built a cairn of rocks, and had a light meal . . . . We named the place Nyarela or Viewpoint, and we returned to the camp [down at the river], which was five or six miles away.' On top of this summit their Mosotho guide Potjo pointed south to a mountain 'where, he assured us, the Baroa [Bushmen] hold out on the left bank of the Black River[6]. He also pointed out to us a spot towards the NE, where he said the Lethuela runs[7]' (Arbousset, p 146). Before they departed the mountains, Arbousset ends by saying that the Maloti are not so far from the sea, '. . . a distance which cannot be very great, since observers situated on the Indian Ocean have been able to recognize them so distinctly' (*ibid*, p 147). As the region was *terra incognita* to the missionaries, Arbousset is understandably inaccurate about the geography as one cannot see the Drakensberg from the Indian Ocean.

In the end the record remains vacant as to who first ascended MAS, or at least who recorded the first ascent. Fairclough (1898), Openshaw and Blackburn (1908), Dobson (1910) are all early written accounts. In Cooke, (1917, p 26) there is a cryptic line: 'In the Basuto War of 1866 Commandant Visser with 546 burghers and 61 Native scout ascended a pass from Buthe-Buthe on the western side of the range, and finally camped on Mont-aux-Sources on the plateau overlooking the Tugela escarpment.' This event is referenced 3rd hand in both Liebenberg (1972) and Pearse (1974), 'evidence' of an early ascent of MAS but there is no supporting reference in either[8]. Liebenberg (*ibid*) also references Capt. Allison's Forces as first up Namahadi Pass in 1869 and one must wonder if they rode or walked atop MAS. Inevitably, given the importance of this (bridle) pass between Witsieshoek and the Batloka of Mokhotlong where King Moshoeshoe's younger brother Paulos Mopeli lived and gave the Track its namesake, a Mosotho in the early 1800's surely must have ascended MAS. Moreover, we might reasonably assume the Bushman, who preceded and once outnumbered and outpopulated on both sides of the Drakensberg all subsequent black and white tribes, put many of their kin on top to claim 'first ascent'.

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[5] *The missionaries also ran into a family of lions going down Sani Pass.*
[6] *The Malibamatso, which in Sesotho means 'balck pools'*
[7] *This is the Tugela River in Sesotho; it is 15km NE of Mahlasela mountain where they were standing.*
[8] *Liebenberg also lists (1972, p 150) Sir Marshall Clarke as a third ascent of MAS but in fact his tour of eastern Basutoland in 1887 (see also above referenced Jobo Moteane account) did not go there, but went further south and found the source of the Senqu(Orange) River (Clarke, 1888).*

Nevertheless, Arbousset's journey is a daunting, *sui generis* stand alone considering the early times, by a Christian devoted to spreading the best fruits of Western civilization where exploring new territories, peoples, customs, botany and geography were ultimately subordinate to his religious mission. Arbousset was no mountaineer and summits were not his *forte*. His guide, Monaile, said quite clearly in the 1836 *Narrative* (pp 42-3) when arranging for the journey:

> *He had no sympathy with his companions in their joyous and boisterous mirth, for he knew better than they the dangers to which we were likely to be exposed. "The Malutis," said he to us, "are infested with hyenas, tigers, lions, marauding Bushmen and even cannibals [during the mfeane]; there is no beaten track; I may lose my way, and we shall all run the risk of perishing from hunger".*

Arbousset merely committed himself '. . .to the protection of the Lord' and set off (*ibid*, p 42).

In conclusion, let's return to myth: 'There came a day in the winter of 1836 when two French missionaries stood spell-bound on the summit of a peak [Mont-aux-Sources] which forms the centre knot of three diverging lines – the main Drakensberg . . .the Malutis . . and the continuation of the Drakensberg at a lower level, running NE . . .' (Pearse, p 43). One hopes a day will come when this artistic license is relegated to the pages of entertainment, not the pages of history. Who was the Typhoid Mary that took this amazing journey and transformed it into a Ruritanian stance of Drakensberg imagination? One cannot be sure but it is clear that this contrivance was picked up by South African authors, presented as proven fact, and amplified by repetition. It has created a data mist that seems to appeal to celebrity not fact. Ironically, this research relies greatly on the firsthand accounts of the French missionary in question and it is through Arbousset's own writings that we learn, if we take the time to read them, that he did no such thing as stand 'spell bound' on the summit of MAS, much less with his companion Dumas, in 1836. These purlieus of narrative comfort are supposedly easier in the company of like-minded authors but still remain distant from reality. This author would expect that the first ascent of such a significant piece of South African geography be perpended carefully, unquestionably certified, and determined incontrovertibly, not invented. Lack of investigative rigour and a panegyric gasconade all make for a good mountaineering story, however, though it is no closer to the truth than there exist actual dragons in the Drakensberg. A quote from *The Listener* in 1947, once BBC's 'literate and engaged' magazine, on a different but related topic would seem to be an apposite close:

> *Popular' history, that which grips and sways the masses, is mostly a figment. To popularize usually means to over-simplify: fine shades and distinction disappear . . . . On the other hand, to affect the masses, history has to work on their passions and emotions, projecting them through a distorted, mythical past into a coveted future; it is then the product of imagination and fervor, and not of accurate perception and critical understanding. . . The foremost task of honest history is to discredit and drive out its futile or dishonest varieties.* Professor Herbert Butterworth in 'Limitations of Historical Understanding'.

Arbousset put Mont-aux-Sources on the map but he did not put himself on Mont-aux-Sources.

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