

The New Mountaineer in Late Victorian Britain

Materiality, Modernity, and the Haptic Sublime

Alan McNee



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Alan McNec
London, UK

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Introduction

In 1898 the Scottish mountaineer John Norman Collie coined the term from which this book takes its title. ‘The progressive, democratical finger of the “New Mountaineer” is laid with equal irreverence and mockery on Sgurr nan Gillean and Cir Mhor’, Collie wrote.¹

The details of Collie’s protest (in essence, that contemporary climbers were dismissive of the challenges and charms of the Cuillin mountains on the Isle of Skye) are obscure now, but his use of the term ‘New Mountaineer’ remains significant. The New Mountaineer may never have joined the New Woman or the New Journalism in the lexicon of *fin-de-siècle* Britain, but Collie’s belief that a paradigm shift had taken place in the culture of British mountaineering, and that climbers were approaching their activity in a new spirit, was shared by a number of influential writers. This book is about that shift. It examines the profound changes that took place in British mountaineering in the latter part of the nineteenth century, exemplified by the figure of the New Mountaineer, and discusses how attitudes to mountains in this period were transformed by developments both within the recreation of mountaineering and in the wider culture.

Perhaps the most important of the former was the emergence of the new genre of mountaineering literature, which helped to create a self-conscious community of climbers with broadly shared values and attitudes. Meanwhile various cultural and scientific trends influenced the

direction of mountaineering. These included a growing preoccupation with the physical basis of aesthetic sensation, and with physicality and materiality in general; a new interest in the physiology of effort and fatigue; and a characteristically Victorian drive to enumerate, codify, and classify.

This book attempts to trace these developments, and to show how they affected the direction of mountaineering. In the pages that follow, I examine a wide range of literature, including a number of sources that have been ignored in most previous studies of the topic. These include the journals of British mountaineering clubs established several decades after the better-known Alpine Club, and visitors' books from hotels and inns where climbers stayed in Scotland, the English Lake District, and Wales. Through these and many other texts, including memoirs, diaries, and guidebooks, I show how a new approach to mountain climbing emerged in the period from around 1870, and how this was represented in contemporary accounts. I also question to what degree the New Mountaineer represented a real change in the practice of climbing and to what extent he was a product of mountaineering literature itself. I examine critiques and defences of the New Mountaineer, discuss the terms in which mountain experiences were represented, and suggest that an emphasis on physical contact with the quiddity of mountain landscapes became the dominant mode of discussing climbing in late-Victorian Britain. I also argue that, as Romantic discourses about mountains became marginalized, so the physicality and athleticism that replaced them gave rise to a new version of the sublime.

Mountaineering in late-Victorian Britain was one of the characteristic hobbies of the intellectual and commercial elite. This new recreation had a cultural significance that was disproportionate to the relatively small number of people who pursued it actively, and as we shall see writing about mountaineering has a history almost as old as the activity itself. However it is only since the middle of the twentieth century that writers on the sport's history have begun to analyze the causes or wider significance of the growth of mountaineering. Historians have generally interpreted climbing in one of several ways: as a manifestation of a new approach to risk; as an expression of imperialism; as an instance of the importance of manliness; or in the light of changing class and gender relations.

These are all legitimate and productive lines of enquiry. My own starting point, however, has been to question the very notion of a

typical, representative Victorian mountaineer. Many previous accounts of nineteenth-century climbing have tended to elide the differences between the generations of climber who began the sport in the 1850s and those who were climbing towards the end of the century. Instead of assuming that mountaineers were a single group with a coherent, consistent set of values and attitudes, it is more helpful to talk of a multiplicity of narratives and a variety of different Victorian climbers with different attitudes and stated reasons for climbing.

A discernible shift in approach began around 1870, and continued to the end of the century. The climbers of this period had a distinct identity quite different from that of their predecessors in the fifties and sixties. One of my aims in this study has been to look closely at how accounts by mountaineers change over the course of the period from around 1870 to the end of the century, and how they differ from earlier climbing narratives, and to rethink the language of mountaineering. I have been careful to distinguish between the experiences of mountaineers and more general tourist accounts of mountain travel, and I have identified some of the contradictions and paradoxes in mountaineering literature and the different approaches taken by a range of writers. I have also investigated to what degree mountaineering was affected by the wider culture in which climbers operated, and to what extent it constituted a hermetically sealed subculture of its own.

I explore the New Mountaineer and his world over five chapters. [Chapters 2 and 3](#) discusses the sporting, recreational approach that characterized the New Mountaineer, involving disciplines such as mapping and navigation, physical training, photography, and the specialized use of ropes and ice axes. I show how contemporaries regarded this as qualitatively different from the values of the early days of mountaineering, when recreational climbers had supposedly been heavily influenced by the legacy of Romantic writing. I then show another side of this picture by suggesting that these differences were often exaggerated or simplified by late nineteenth-century mountaineering writers. Many mountaineers from the 1850s and even earlier were in fact climbing with a similar attitude to that of the New Mountaineers. For the first generation of British mountaineers, adventure had often been just as powerful a motive as romantic transcendence. Conversely, many climbers in the late nineteenth century were still deeply influenced by Romantic attitudes. I suggest the New Mountaineer was as much a product of the narrative of mountaineering literature as of the praxis of mountain climbing. At the same time, I show that climbers in the late

nineteenth century were increasingly confident in claiming that their direct physical engagement with mountains gave them a privileged experience of wild nature not available to the more casual mountain tourist or other observer.

Chapter 4, ‘The Climbing Body’, is concerned with physicality, and connects the New Mountaineer to the wider scientific, medical, and cultural preoccupations of late-Victorian society. I discuss the arguably unprecedented pleasure that climbers were able to take in sensations traditionally considered undesirable, including fatigue, cold, exposure to danger, and discomfort, and I suggest that these are linked to an idea of embodied perception that is central to the ethos of mountaineering at this time. Chapter 5, ‘The Haptic Sublime’, shows how this new approach leads, paradoxically, to a resurgence of the aesthetic of the sublime. However, this new, reinvigorated sublime is qualitatively different from eighteenth-century and Romantic discourses about wild nature. The haptic sublime involves an emphasis on direct physical experience and embodied understanding of mountain landscapes. The mountaineers of this period insisted on the greater intensity and precision of their experience of mountains, which was closely related to the physical nature of their encounters with rock face, glacier, and snow slope.

In Chapter 6, I examine how these new values and beliefs were potentially threatened by the phenomenon of mass tourism to mountain regions, and the strategies – both in the practice of mountaineering and its literature – that were adopted to deal with the threat. Mountaineers looked down on and resented the figure of the cockney tourist or tripper, but they also saw him as subversive of some of their most cherished values. Tourism altered both the physical and psychological landscape in which climbers pursued their hobby.

Before examining these topics, it will be helpful to set out the pre-history of the New Mountaineer. By the time Collie coined the term, mountaineering was already well established as a leisure activity. Eminent Victorians including Leslie Stephen, John Tyndall, Herbert Spencer, John Ruskin, and Martin Conway all contributed to the debate about the purpose and direction of mountaineering. However their prominence and the high level of public interest in mountaineering in this period make it easy to forget just how new this activity was, and how different the Victorian approach to mountains was to that of previous ages. In order to understand how radically different the activity of climbing became from the 1870s, we need to be familiar first with

mountaineering's relatively short history, and secondly with its literature. These will be summarized in the next two sections.

VICTORIAN MOUNTAINEERING HISTORICIZED

Mountaineering as a recognized leisure activity, undertaken from sporting rather than from scientific motives, really only began in earnest in the middle of the nineteenth century. The formation of the Alpine Club in London in 1857, and the journals it started to publish from the end of that decade, gave shape to this new activity and propelled it into the wider public consciousness. Prior to this period, mountaineering had scarcely existed other than as the preserve of specialist scientists and a few adventurous travellers. Most recreational ascents of mountains in the early nineteenth century were limited to Mont Blanc (climbed because it was the highest summit in the Alps), Snowdon, Ben Nevis, and a few Lakeland peaks. To put the increase in climbing activity in the nineteenth century into perspective: by 1800, only about twenty-two major Alpine peaks had been scaled, a figure which rose to ninety-seven by the middle of the century.² By 1865, at the end of what became known as the Alpine Golden Age, climbers had made first ascents of 140 Alpine summits.³

Prior to this explosion of activity, there had been isolated ascents of mountains dating back several centuries; among the most commonly cited are climbs undertaken by the humanist scholar and poet Francesco Petrarca (Petrarch) in 1355 and the Swiss naturalist Conrad Gesner in 1543.⁴ Such ascents were the exception to the rule that for most of human history people did not actively seek out the potential danger and discomfort of climbing mountains. It was not until the eighteenth century that mountain ascents became more common, with scientific or financial motives stimulating most efforts.⁵ In 1760 the geologist Gottlieb Gruner published his study of Swiss glaciers, *Die Eisgebirge des Schweiserlandes*, based on research carried out in the field, then in 1783 Swiss scientist Horace Benedict de Saussure offered a cash prize to the first person to ascend Mont Blanc. Three years later, Michel-Gabriel Paccard and Jacques Balmat reached the summit and claimed the reward.⁶ Saussure made his own ascent to carry out scientific observations the following year and between 1779 and 1796 published his four-volume *Voyages dans les Alpes* in which he propounded his theories on the origin and movement of glaciers, a topic that would continue to dominate scientific investigations in the Alps up to the middle of the nineteenth century.⁷ Mont Blanc continued to be the focus of most

mountaineering activity into the nineteenth century, with a total of thirteen ascents being made by 1819 – far more than for any other Alpine peak.⁸ As a biographer of one of its most famous climbers later noted, those who climbed Mont Blanc in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century were ‘not mountaineers in the modern sense of the word, for they climbed no other mountains. They climbed Mont Blanc because it was the highest mountain in Europe; they saw no point in climbing anything smaller.’⁹

The combination of scientific and pecuniary motives that had conquered Mont Blanc persisted into the first half of the nineteenth century, with scientists assisted in travelling through the mountains by paid local guides, usually chamois hunters or herders – an arrangement that would eventually form the basis of the formal mountain guide system, with the formation of the *Compagnie des Guides de Chamonix* in 1821.¹⁰ A number of British and Continental European scientists, including the Swiss biologist Louis Agassiz and Scottish physicist James David Forbes, carried out field work on glaciation, geology, and other aspects of Alpine science in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. By the 1830s Agassiz, examining the composition and movement of glaciers, had deduced that erratic rocks – large boulders that clearly came from a different region to where they were found – had been carried to their present position by glacial action.¹¹ Forbes made his first visit to the Alps in 1826 but began serious investigation into the structure of glaciers in the late 1830s and published his influential *Travels Through the Alps of Savoy* in 1843. In it he propounded his theory that the entire structure of a glacier was a viscous body that moved in much the same manner as a fluid, a theory which proved to be broadly correct but led to a bitter controversy between Forbes and Agassiz, and later between Forbes and the physicist and mountaineer John Tyndall. Forbes was effectively accused of plagiarizing the work of others, a charge that seriously damaged his reputation.¹²

The glacier controversies of the 1840s suggest the centrality of scientific research to the development of interest in mountains and mountaineering. Yet the intense publicity generated by this quarrel tends to obscure the existence of a concurrent strain in the history of mountain travel which owed much more to a thirst for adventure and to the legacy of Romantic discourses about mountains than to scientific research. Even by the early years of the nineteenth century some visitors to the Alps found, as Walt Unsworth puts it, ‘science taking second place to the thrill of climbing’.¹³ Meanwhile, the disparate group of writers and artists that would retroactively come to be known as the Romantic movement was depicting

mountain landscapes in ways that celebrated rugged, irregular nature and often emphasized the subjective experience of the human visitor to the mountains. Thomas West's *A Guide to the Lakes* (1778), William Wordsworth's 1790 visit to the Alps, later recorded in his *Descriptive Sketches* (1793), in the sixth book of *The Prelude* (1805, 1850), and in *Memorials of a Tour of the Continent* (1822), Walter Scott's depiction of Highland scenery in his poetry and in novels including *Waverley* (1814) and *Rob Roy* (1817), the Shelleys' *The History of a Six Weeks' Tour* (1817), and George Gordon, Lord Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (published between 1812 and 1818) all contributed to a growing interest in mountains both at home and abroad, while the end of the Napoleonic wars, the introduction of regular cross-Channel steamers, and improved rail networks in Britain and on Continental Europe allowed more visitors to travel to mountainous areas.¹⁴

It is at this juncture of science, Romantic literary convention, and adventurous exploration that Victorian mountaineering begins to take shape, as these three motives for visiting mountains become intertwined, only to disentangle later in the century. There was no precise moment at which scientific motives ceased to be the main factor in mountain climbing, and fieldwork continued into the second half of the nineteenth century; Tyndall, for example, continued to investigate glaciers up to 1864, and published his *Forms of Water in Clouds, Rivers, Ice and Glaciers* in 1872. But by the middle of the century nearly all the important fieldwork in mountain science had been done. Meanwhile the practice of science itself had become more specialized and professionalized, with little scope for enthusiastic amateurs to make significant discoveries and few incentives for them to take along barometers and other technical equipment on their ascents.¹⁵ Tyndall, a professional scientist who also happened to be a climber and sometime member of the Alpine Club, was an exceptional rather than a representative figure among Victorian mountaineers, and by the 1850s, as the mountaineering historian William Augustus Brevoort Coolidge put it, 'Englishmen were waking up to the fact that "mountaineering" is a pastime that combines many advantages, and is worth pursuing as an end in itself, without any regard to any thought of the advancement of natural science'.¹⁶

The downplaying of scientific motives and the ascendancy of adventure as a reason for climbing mountains was perhaps most clearly illustrated by two seminal events in the 1850s: Albert Smith's 1851 ascent of Mont Blanc (and subsequent London show about the climb) and Alfred Wills' 1854 ascent of the Wetterhorn, often described as the start of Alpine

mountaineering's Golden Age. Smith was arguably the individual who did most to popularize mountaineering among Britons. Mont Blanc had been climbed just forty times before his visit, an average of less than once a year since Paccard and Balmat in 1786, and ascents were still rare enough that cannon were fired in Chamonix to hail successful climbers. In the five years following Smith's ascent, by contrast, Mont Blanc was climbed eighty-eight times, a rise in popularity which owed a good deal to Smith's considerable talents as a self-publicist.¹⁷ The book he wrote about the climb, *The Story of Mont Blanc* (1853), and the phenomenally successful London stage show in which he recounted his adventures, were arguably the most important factors in popularizing mountaineering beyond the small coterie of scientists and adventurers who had climbed Mont Blanc in the preceding decades.¹⁸

Smith was not the only British climber to write about his adventures – John Auldjo's 1827 account of climbing Mont Blanc, for example, had been a powerful early influence on Smith's own ambition to scale the mountain – but the sheer scale and bravura nature of his show meant he influenced a wide swathe of the British public, notably the middle classes who would prove to be so crucial in the development of mountaineering. 'The Ascent of Mont Blanc', which Smith performed at the Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly between 1852 and 1858, played to packed houses throughout its two thousand performances. Writing about the history of mountaineering at the end of the century, Charles Edward Mathews (himself an important figure in the Golden Age and a founding member of the Alpine Club) was to claim that 'scores of men who afterwards distinguished themselves in the exploration of the great Alps first had their imagination fired by listening to the interesting story told at the Egyptian Hall'.¹⁹

'The Ascent of Mont Blanc' took the form of an illustrated lecture accompanied by a diorama – a moving panorama painted with scenes of the ascent, as well as of Smith's journey from London to the Alps, and of his escapades in Paris on the return journey. The format combined educative content with amusing spectacle, and proved a huge hit with mid-Victorian audiences: the phenomenon of 'Mont Blanc mania' was widely commented upon at the time. Smith's irreverent, humorous tone had the effect of debunking both the scientific approach and the traditional Romantic conceptions of the Alps.

His written account of his Mont Blanc adventure was similarly dismissive of both Romantic and scientific conventions of mountain literature,

preferring instead a breathless tone of adventure and excitement. This description of the ‘all but perpendicular iceberg’ of the Mur de la Côte gives a taste of Smith’s prose style:

Should the foot slip, or the baton give way, there is no chance for life – you would glide like lightning from one frozen crag to another, and finally be dashed to pieces, hundreds of feet below in the horrible depths of the glacier.²⁰

Clearly there is little room for either calm scientific enquiry or Romantic transcendence here. In places he even seems to be deliberately undermining the scientific approach to mountains. Upon arriving on the summit, he reported,

We made no ‘scientific observations’ – the acute and honest de Saussure had done everything that was wanted by the world of that kind; and those who have since worried themselves during the ascent about ‘elevations’ and ‘temperatures’ have added nothing to what he told us sixty years ago.²¹

Smith betrayed an attitude of mind that was determined to bypass the scientific justification for Alpine travel in favour of adventure and sensation. His approach to climbing turned out to be prescient: in the decades to come, the last vestiges of scientific motives for mountaineering would disappear, as would any pretence at a quest for the sublime inspired by the values that Romantic poets and artists had located in the mountains. The new generation of Victorian middle-class men would approach the Alps, and increasingly the mountains of their own islands, with the same hearty sporting zeal that characterized participants in the Oxford and Cambridge boat race or public school cricket matches. While Smith may not have single-handedly caused this change in the British attitude towards mountains and mountain climbing, he was both an important catalyst for it and an early proponent of it.

Alfred Wills was a very different figure to Albert Smith, but his legacy would prove equally influential. Wills – who in later life as a high court judge would preside over Oscar Wilde’s 1895 trial for gross indecency – reached the summit of the Wetterhorn in September 1854, inaugurating the Golden Age of British Alpinism. His climb has often been held up as the first ascent of an Alpine mountain other than Mont Blanc made for purely ‘sporting’ reasons, a claim that ignores the Continental European

climbers who had made recreational ascents of numerous other mountains in the years before Wills first visited the Alps.²² Wills was not even the first to climb the Wetterhorn: his was probably the fifth ascent of it.²³ But it was ‘the first climb to which predominantly sporting motives were attributed at the time’.²⁴ By choosing a mountain other than Mont Blanc he set a precedent other British visitors would soon follow, and the publicity surrounding Wills’ achievement stimulated a public imagination that was already primed by Albert Smith’s show and book. Wills wrote about his experience in *Wanderings Among the High Alps* (1856), a book whose moments of high drama echo the adventurous tone of Smith’s descriptions and set the tone for subsequent descriptions of mountain experiences in journals and books. Writing of the moments before he and his guide, Auguste Balmat, reached the summit, Wills’ normally restrained and rather dry prose style gives way to excitement and tension:

As I took the last step, Balmat disappeared from my sight; my left shoulder grazed against the angle of the icy embrasure, while, on the right, the glacier fell away abruptly beneath me, towards an unknown and awful abyss: a hand from an invisible person grasped mine; I stepped across, and had passed the ridge of the Wetterhorn!²⁵

Wills has been described as ‘the first person to advocate mountaineering as a pursuit worthwhile in itself’.²⁶ In this respect he was as important as Albert Smith as a propagandist for the non-scientific approach to mountains. After Wills and Smith the stated reasons for climbing mountains had permanently changed. What might be termed Romantic motives for mountain climbing had also been influential for at least some visitors in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, but these too eroded in the years following Smith’s success. Romantic literature had clearly been an influence on how mountain landscapes were viewed, although it is less clear to what degree it ever influenced mountaineering practices: as Robert H. Bates points out, a considerable proportion of Romantic poetry about mountains either deals with the valleys or lower slopes, or describes mountains viewed from a distance.²⁷ Experiencing mountains close up, with direct physical contact and consequent knowledge of what Martin Conway would call the ‘cold stony reality’ of their materiality, soon became central to the ethos of late-Victorian climbers.²⁸

The Alpine Club was formed in 1857, and quickly established itself as the driving force of this new British pastime. Its membership list included

both the intellectual aristocracy of mid-Victorian Britain – Stephen, Tyndall, Thomas Huxley, and Matthew Arnold were among its more prominent members – and the climbers who would create the Golden Age by conquering new peaks in a surge of mountaineering activity in the years leading up to the Matterhorn tragedy of 1865. This latter group included John Ball, Edward Shirley Kennedy, Thomas Hinchcliff, and the brothers Charles Edward Mathews and George Spencer Mathews. The Club’s publications, *Peaks, Passes, and Glaciers* (1859–1862) and then the *Alpine Journal* (1863 onwards), were read and discussed well beyond its relatively exclusive membership, keeping mountaineering in the public eye where Albert Smith and Alfred Wills had already lodged it.²⁹ By 1862, the *Cornhill Magazine* could begin an article on ‘The Art of Alpine Travel’ by asserting that mountaineering was now ‘firmly established as one of our national sports’, a claim that could not have been made even a decade earlier.³⁰

From its inception, the Alpine Club was in a rather paradoxical position with regards to the tradition of scientific mountaineering. Originally conceived as simply a dining club, it quickly changed into a more serious organization, holding monthly meetings where members read papers about their mountaineering exploits.³¹ Although the *Alpine Journal* was subtitled ‘A Record of Mountain Adventures and Scientific Observations by Members of the Alpine Club’, the linkage of adventure and scientific observation this implied proved short-lived, and most of the papers and articles continued to de-emphasize science, as Wills and Smith had done. The Club’s early publications did contain a considerable number of papers on scientific topics: the second volume of *Peaks, Passes, and Glaciers*, for example, carried an article on the ‘Amount of Ozone at Different Altitudes’ by Francis Fox Tuckett.³² However, the very first article in the first edition of the *Alpine Journal*, an account of ‘The Ascent of Monte della Disgrazia’ by the Club’s then president, Edward Shirley Kennedy, indicates how ready mountaineers were to jettison the scientific justification for climbing mountains by the early 1860s. Kennedy opens with a description that would not seem out of place in a Gothic novel: ‘As the strokes of midnight were clanging from the Campanile of Sondrio, a carriage rolled heavily into the court-yard of the Hotel della Maddalena’.³³ He continues in this vein for several paragraphs:

How free and exultant is the true mountaineer, when he exchanges the warmly-glowing atmosphere of the south for the cold and invigorating

blasts of the mountain; when he leaves behind him the gentle beauty of the lakes, and glories in the savage grandeur of riven rock and contorted glacier.³⁴

Having settled into a prose style that seems heavily influenced by Romantic literary conventions (with stock assumptions about the characteristics of Mediterranean countries, phrases like ‘savage grandeur’, and notions of the liberating and spiritually elevating qualities of mountain landscapes), Kennedy then introduces two competing elements, which could broadly be termed the scientific and the athletic:

Our energies [in the Italian Alps] were partly devoted to the elucidation of matters of antiquarian and geological interest; but while ethnology and physical science claimed their due, another and a mightier attraction existed; we had an unascended peak in contemplation, and what mountaineer can resist the charms which such an object presents?³⁵

With its uncomfortable attempts to accommodate different priorities and its explicit admission that mountain adventure will always take precedence over scientific observation, this first *Journal* article sets the tone for much subsequent mountaineering prose. Later in the same article, after describing his party reaching the summit, Kennedy asks rhetorically, ‘What was our first thought?’, and supplies a range of possible answers from the aesthetic and the scientific to the purely phlegmatic. Appreciation of the magnificent view is one option, as is recourse to scientific measurement (‘where is the barometer and the boiling-water apparatus?’). ‘What have we to eat and drink?’ is another possibility, along with ‘How shall we get down again?’ Instead, Kennedy concludes: ‘Each and every one of these sources of gratification sink into insignificance when compared to the exhilarating consciousness of difficulty overcome, and of success attained by perseverance’.³⁶

Despite this acknowledgement that the triumphant overcoming of physical challenges would now take precedence over scientific or aesthetic considerations, subsequent volumes of the *Alpine Journal* did attempt to shoehorn scientific and adventure discourses into the same publication. So, for example, a technical article on ‘The Sympiezometer and Aneroid Barometer’ sits rather incongruously in Volume 2 next to an account of ‘Excursions in the Graian Alps’ in which the writer, R.C. Nichols, recalls how he had ‘hoped to make a fair bag of new peaks and passes’.³⁷

The adventurous, athletic discourse represented by the latter article soon prevailed, and the number of scientific articles decreased. The first volume of the *Journal* had its own scientific index, listing short articles on ‘Phosphorescent Snow’, ‘Electricity in the Pyrenees’, and ‘Minimum Thermometers’, but by the third volume there were scarcely any such articles outside the brief ‘Miscellanea’ section at the end. By 1865 Leslie Stephen could confidently mock what he regarded as the pretensions of scientific mountaineers in a speech to members about his ascent of the Rothhorn:

‘And what philosophical observations did you make?’ will be the enquiry of one of those fanatics who, by a reasoning process to me utterly inscrutable, have somehow irrevocably associated Alpine travelling with science. To them I answer, that the temperature was approximately (I had no thermometer) 212 degrees (Fahrenheit) below freezing point. As for ozone, if any existed in the atmosphere, it was a greater fool than I take it for.³⁸

The notoriously thin-skinned John Tyndall regarded Stephen’s speech as such a direct attack that he resigned from the Club in protest (Tyndall was prone to take offence, having fallen out over the years not only with Forbes but with other scientists including James and William Thomson and Peter Guthrie Tait, and with the equally argumentative Edward Whymper).³⁹ Stephen’s comments, however, were remarkable only for their degree of levity and irreverence: he was simply reflecting an attitude that was increasingly common among British mountaineers. After all, even Tyndall himself had ruefully admitted in 1860 that the contribution of his fellow mountaineers to science had been ‘*nil*’ and that instead, ‘Their pleasure is that of overcoming acknowledged difficulties, and of witnessing natural grandeur’.⁴⁰

Nonetheless, a scientific *sensibility* did continue to inform and influence the way mountaineers thought and wrote about their recreation, and it is worth noting that Stephen’s article in this volume of the *Journal* came immediately after a complex technical article on the determination of altitude.⁴¹ A scientific cast of mind allied to a professional, technically-skilled approach adopted by the middle-class men who dominated the culture of mountaineering would soon give rise to narratives of adventure and athleticism recounted in a register which maintained the scientific and classificatory conventions and assumptions of mid- to late-Victorian Britain. Thus, while the ethos of adventure in late-Victorian

climbing in some respects undermined and supplanted the practice of climbing for scientific motives, the continuing influence of what David Robbins calls ‘scientism’ would remain a pervasive and important element of how mountaineers thought and wrote about their sport.⁴² Rather than being a specific, avowed motive, Robbins sees scientism as a lingering attachment to the traditions and conventions of science, and to a scientific cast of mind.

The period after the Golden Age witnessed the paradoxical spectacle of a diminution of actual science accompanied by the continuation of Robbins’ ‘scientism’. As the century wore on, this made climbers increasingly prone to claim, not so much superior scientific knowledge as a kind of heightened or sharpened awareness of their environment. Bruce Hevly suggests that, even as early as the glacier controversies of the 1840s, the ‘rhetoric of adventure’ had become an important element in the culture of science itself, at least as carried out in the field by men like Forbes and Tyndall. Scientists, Hevly argues, tended to claim ‘reliable perception on the basis of authentic, rigorous, manly experience’, and he contends that scientific mountaineers claimed what he called ‘The Authority of Adventurous Observation’.⁴³ Hevly’s argument that British scientists ‘acted as part of a culture that celebrated sport as one of the distinguishing marks of gentlemen and a route to a disciplined perception of the world’ may be relevant to the question of how and why science was ultimately eclipsed by adventure as a motive for mountain climbing in the second half of the century.⁴⁴ He shows how Tyndall, for example, presented the phenomenon of regelation (the fusing together of pieces of ice which have previously melted under pressure, once the pressure is removed) in terms not so much of conventional science but of mountain adventure. Tyndall, Hevly suggests, represented regelation as ‘the property of glacial ice that allowed intrepid climbers to carefully edge their way over deep crevasses’.⁴⁵ This is the passage that Hevly refers to, from Tyndall’s *The Glaciers of the Alps*:

It is this same principle of regelation which enables men to cross snow bridges in safety. By gentle cautious pressure the loose granules of the substance are cemented into a continuous mass, all sudden shocks which might cause the frozen surfaces to snap asunder being avoided. In this way an arch of snow fifteen or twenty inches in thickness may be rendered so firm that a man will cross it, although it may span a chasm one hundred feet in depth.⁴⁶

Thus, suggests Hevly, ‘the physical properties of ice become simultaneously the stuff of science and the stuff of adventure’.⁴⁷ In other words, the scientists themselves were at least partly responsible for the ascendancy of narratives of sport and adventure that came to displace scientific discourses in the second part of the century. Science and scientists thus helped create the conditions that brought about their own marginalization from the culture of mountaineering.

If scientists themselves became marginal, the ‘Authority of Adventurous Observation’ continued to be a central element in the claims made by mountaineers in the latter part of the century. Just as Hevly suggests both Forbes and Tyndall ‘argued that their research on the causes of glacial motion were rendered reliable by the purposeful action each expended in the Alps’, so later generations of climbers, from Stephen onwards, would argue that their own purposeful action in the mountains gave rise to a greater degree of accurate, intimate understanding of the true nature of mountain landscapes than the passive observer could hope for.⁴⁸ This claim to authority – an authority based not just on visual evidence but on direct physical experience – was very important to Victorian climbers, and was frequently and insistently made in climbing literature long after the practical pursuit of science had ceased to be a feature of mountaineering.

The Alpine Golden Age ended abruptly and violently in July 1865. The English mountaineer Edward Whymper and six companions had just completed the first ascent of the Matterhorn and were descending when one of them slipped. The rope broke and Roger Hadow, Chamonix mountain guide Michel Croz, Lord Francis Douglas, and the Reverend Charles Hudson all fell to their deaths. Whymper and his two surviving guides, the elder and the younger Peter Taugwalder, made their way down to Zermatt to break the news.⁴⁹ Recriminations began almost immediately, and soon a backlash against the very idea of mountaineering had begun. An outraged editorial in *The Times* asked, ‘Is it life? Is it duty? Is it common sense? Is it allowable? Is it not wrong?’⁵⁰ and Charles Dickens denounced the ‘foolhardihood’ and ‘contempt for and waste of human life’ involved in the activity.⁵¹ Mountaineering briefly lost its prestige and was seen by many as unjustifiably dangerous, even disreputable.

In retrospect the impact of the Matterhorn disaster appears as a brief interlude in the broader story of mountaineering’s growth as a sport, but that was certainly not how it seemed to its adherents at the time. Looking back at this period from the vantage point of the early twentieth century, Coolidge recalled how mountaineers felt themselves a

beleaguered minority in the wake of the accident and the public opprobrium it engendered:

Few in number, all knowing each other personally, shunning the public gaze so far as possible (and in those days it *was* possible to do so), they went about under a sort of dark shade, looked on with scarcely disguised contempt by the world of ordinary travellers. They, so to speak, climbed on sufferance, enjoying themselves much, it is true, but keeping all expression of that joy to themselves in order not to excite derision.⁵²

This atmosphere was not to last long. Instead, the Golden Age gave way to another period of intense activity, during which the route to the summit and the technique used to scale it became the most important factors in the prestige and attraction of a climb, and British climbers also turned their attention to the mountains of the Lake District, north Wales, and Scotland. After the brief period of disapproval that followed the Matterhorn tragedy, climbing became more popular than ever.

THE LITERATURE OF MOUNTAINEERING

The year 1871 proved to be an *annus mirabilis* for mountaineering literature, with the publication of three classic works: Leslie Stephen's *The Playground of Europe*, John Tyndall's *Hours of Exercise in the Alps*, and Edward Whymper's *Scrambles Amongst the Alps in the Years 1860–1869*. All three caught the public imagination, although perhaps for different reasons. Whymper's book was of interest in part because he used it to make public his own version of the events on the Matterhorn six years earlier. Stephen's was marked by what Jim Ring calls his 'combination of adventure with wit, charm and intelligence'.⁵³ Tyndall described his book as 'for the most part a record of bodily action', and recounted exciting descriptions of assaults on the Matterhorn, Bel Alp, and Weisshorn, among other Alpine peaks, but he also revealed an unexpectedly poetic, even spiritual sensibility on the part of this seemingly dry man of science.⁵⁴ All three, though, have in common an unshamed celebration of adventure, physical challenge, and the measured but unflinching acceptance of an element of risk. None of their authors would have been characterized as New Mountaineers – instead, they were of the generation responsible for the Golden Age.⁵⁵ But the sensibility of these books seems to usher in a new era, in which the changes discussed in this book become manifest and are

increasingly the subject of discussion and debate. From the early 1870s onwards, a distinct new era in British mountain climbing had begun, and the characteristic figure of the New Mountaineer was starting to emerge.

Within a few years of the Alpine Club's establishment, articles began to appear in the *Alpine Journal* describing early ascents of mountains, and by the end of the century it was common for mountaineers to write about the history of their sport.⁵⁶ By the late nineteenth century, mountaineering had found its first dedicated historian in W.A.B. Coolidge. Coolidge, who edited the *Alpine Journal* from 1880 to 1889, wrote numerous detailed articles about historical Alpine ascents, and later published *The Alps in Nature and History* (1908), a comprehensive study of the history of Alpine mountaineering, as well as of the geography, politics, and natural history of the region. Around the same time, Francis Gribble was publishing his account of early mountain ascents, including those of Petrarch and Gesner as well as the first recorded ascent of Mont Aiguille near Grenoble in 1492.⁵⁷

Coolidge and Gribble, like many subsequent historians of mountaineering, mostly restricted themselves to straightforward factual accounts of the sport's history with little analysis of the causes or wider significance of the growth of climbing. It was not until Marjorie Hope Nicolson's *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory* (1959) that a serious interpretation of the historical background to the new interest in mountain landscapes was attempted. Some nineteenth-century mountaineers had noted in their speeches and publications how novel their sport was, but Nicolson was the first to analyze in detail the historical shift in human attitudes to mountains, from viewing them with fear and repugnance to seeing them as beautiful, fascinating, and in some respects as the repository of natural virtue. Nicolson argued that the change from 'Mountain Gloom' to 'Mountain Glory' (phrases borrowed from John Ruskin) was the result of a fundamental shift in the way humans viewed wild nature, itself the result of profound changes in beliefs about the structure of the universe and about humanity's relationship to its natural environment.⁵⁸ Nicolson did not discuss mountain climbing itself but her book effectively constitutes a prehistory of mountaineering, tracing the new set of attitudes and conditions that made it possible for people to contemplate climbing mountains for recreation.

Until the late twentieth century, writing about mountaineering tended to fall broadly into one of two categories: narrative history recounting the dates when individual peaks were first climbed, subsequent ascents by

different routes, and the development of techniques and equipment; or more general surveys of the development of attitudes to mountains, and in particular of the influence of Romantic literature and art on attitudes to mountain landscapes. Narrative histories of climbing include Ronald Clark's *The Victorian Mountaineers* (1953), R.L.G. Irving's *A History of British Mountaineering* (1955), Unsworth's *Hold the Heights* (1993), and Simon Thompson's *Unjustifiable Risk* (2010). Others focus on particular mountain regions. Alan Hankinson's *The First Tigers* (1972) covers the early days of rock climbing in the Lake District and his *The Mountain Men* (1977) does the same for north Wales. Scotland's mountain climbing history has been described by Campbell Steven in *The Story of Scotland's Hills* (1975) and its prehistory in Ian Mitchell's *Scotland's Mountains Before the Mountaineers* (1998), while particular regions and even individual mountains have also been the subject of detailed histories.⁵⁹ Jim Ring's *How the English Made the Alps* (2000), Fergus Fleming's *Killing Dragons* (2001), and Trevor Braham's *When the Alps Cast Their Spell* (2004) focus on how late eighteenth and nineteenth-century Britons moved from regarding the Alps as a remote, inhospitable region that had to be crossed to reach southern Europe on the Grand Tour to viewing them as a venue for recreational activities.

As well as these broad historical surveys, the rise of mountaineering has more recently been the subject of more detailed analysis. In *Landscape and Memory* (1995), Simon Schama, following Nicolson's example, puts Victorian mountaineering into the broader history of shifting attitudes to nature, while Robert Macfarlane's *Mountains of the Mind* (2003) explains the appeal of climbing with reference to developments in geology, aesthetics, literature, cartography, and popular culture. Others view the rise of mountaineering through the prism of class, imperialism, gender, and other aspects of wider Victorian society. David Robertson discusses Alpine climbing as an expression of Victorian masculinity, with its stress on games and sportsmanship, arguing that what was important to mountaineers was 'right-minded management of the stout-hearted effort'.⁶⁰ Peter Hansen emphasizes the importance of mountaineering in the construction of a specifically upper middle-class masculine identity in the mid- to late nineteenth century, suggesting that mountaineering was 'one of the cultural responses of the middle class to the historical experiences of industry and empire, class formation and self-definition, prosperity and the accelerating circulation of wealth itself'.⁶¹ Hansen also explicitly links mountain climbing to imperial expansion, claiming that from the early days of the Alpine