Yester-year and today’s British in Haute-Savoie: the Flavour of the Alps

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Abstract

The Golden Age of mountaineering in the Alps is most often remembered in terms of conquest and physical exploit, and associated with the somewhat arrogant appropriation of the alpine mountain range as a would-be favourite British “playground”.

This paper proposes a reading of the writings of two British alpinists of the time, Leslie Stephen and Alfred Wills, showing that the motive for their presence in the mountain was not only a sportive one but derived from a special link that they had formed with the alpine scenery. Their regular immersion in this landscape, their need for co-presence with the mountain, are evidence of a deeper link with the place and its inhabitants, whether with the guides who accompanied them or with the artists – some of them rope companions themselves, such as the painter and alpinist Gabriel Loppé – who used to spend summer in the region. The private collection of letters sent or received by Alfred Wills between 1850 and 1880 brings additional evidence to this perspective.

Finally as British migration to the valley of Chamonix has reached record figures in the last few years, we cannot but question the persistence of this relation to the mountain among some of these new seasonal or permanent residents, met in the course of a survey conducted in the area between 2004 and 2006.

Keywords


The Golden Age: an age of conquest?

The Golden Age of mountaineering in the Alps is most often remembered in terms of conquest or victory won by a group of British Alpinists over the highest summits of the Alps. From the ascent of the Wetterhorn by Alfred Wills in 1854 to the tragic ascent of the Matterhorn by Whymper in 1865, sport exploits and physical efforts seemed to override any other consideration. The Alpine club, founded in 1857, stressed and even perpetuated this approach of the mountains. It was first and foremost a club of alpinists whose members, according to Simon Schama: “did think of themselves as a caste apart, a Spartan phalanx, tough with muscular virtue, spare with speech, seeking the chill clarity of the mountains” (1996: 502).

The first circular released in 1857 specified that

The object of the Alpine Club is to facilitate association among those who possess a similarity of taste, and to enable its members to make arrangements for meeting at some suitable locality whence they may in company undertake any of the more difficult mountain excursions, and to give to all an opportunity of consulting the maps and books to be placed in the rooms which it is expected the Club will eventually possess. The members will occasionally dine together at their own expense, but the funds of the Club will be made available when on suitable occasions the Club is favoured by the presence of geographical explorers, or by that of other guests of celebrity.¹

¹ Alpine Club website: <www.alpine-club.org.uk>
Admission required and still requires the capacity of achieving a certain number of difficult ascents as specified on the alpine club website today: “To become a Full Member, we ask that you have climbed a minimum of 20 respectable alpine routes or peaks, or the equivalent of this in other ranges and wilderness areas”.

In those days, clubmen would meet regularly in London and exchange useful information and notes on their latest ascents. They also wrote minute reports on their excursions or “scrambles” in the journal of the club which was and is still published once a year. Without replacing the journal, the Internet has obviously facilitated and widened the scope of exchanges today: “We provide a forum for sharing experiences and information. We welcome all mountaineers” says the informative text to the reader on the website.

Leslie Stephen and aesthetic emotion

While Ruskin (1860 and 1865) flared up at the hordes of tourists invading the Alps and castigated the alpinists who “violated the cathedrals of the earth”, Leslie Stephen was writing The Playground of Europe, published in 1871 and whose title in itself translated a certain Victorian representation of mountains: the domination of a space that had been conquered and transformed into a leisure and recreation ground.

However when looking more closely into Stephen’s book, it appears that his writing cannot be classified as a mere relation of his excursions in the Alps. As a preamble to the second edition published in 1894, he included the following letter addressed to his French friend, painter and alpinist Gabriel Loppé:

Twenty-one years ago we climbed Mont Blanc together to watch the sunset from the summit. Less than a year ago we observed the same phenomenon from the foot of the mountain. The intervening years have probably made little difference in the sunset. If they have made some difference in our powers of reaching the best point of view, they have, I hope, diminished neither our admiration of such spectacles, nor our pleasure in each other’s companionship.

Would age have increased or sharpened the two men’s perception of some aesthetic emotion to the point that Stephen wished to include this letter more than twenty years after the publication of the first edition? One surely perceives some nostalgia for bygone years, for the full vigour of their youth which allowed the most daring feats, but the admiration felt for the spectacle is also present in the text itself. In the chapter entitled: A Sunset on Mont Blanc (first published in the Cornhill magazine before being included in the revised edition of 1894) telling about an excursion with Gabriel Loppé, Stephen speaks of “an hour of as keen delight as not often occurs to an enthusiastic lover of the sublime in nature” (Stephen: 304), adding that he is unable to translate in words the images he contemplates. He also confides both his envy and admiration for his painter friend, sitting in the snow at the summit of the Mont Blanc and working at capturing “some of the magic beauties of the scene” on his canvas: “I wish I could substitute his canvas […] for my words”( Stephen: 306), he says.

Already we feel that the two friends’ motive for climbing did not rest on the sole achievement of the ascent. There was something more to it, if only in the “gaze” (in Urry’s words, 1990) that they cast on the places they chose to ascend and which made them different from other climbers in quest of sole physical prowess.

However even if “the most eloquent language is but a poor substitute for a painter's brush”, Stephen goes on, “a painter's brush lags far behind these grandest aspects of nature”. In Stephen’s eyes or intimate intuition, even the picture failed to translate the sight offered to
them since the contemplation of landscape, he said, is “one of those rare moments of life at which all the surrounding scenery is instantaneously and indelibly photographed on the mental retina by a process which no second-hand operation can even dimly transfer to others” (Stephen: 305)

When Schama writes: “To Stephen, only firsthand experience of climbs, the more dangerous the better, actually conferred the right to describe ‘mountain truth’” (Schama: 504), he is only referring to the interest in the physical feat, thus totally eclipsing the powerful aesthetic emotion felt by the Victorian alpinist, as well as his avowed difficulty in transmitting this emotion in words and in pictures.

And wasn’t this quest for aesthetic emotion the true motive that pushed Stephen to follow his friend Gabriel Loppé in one of his ascents of Mont Blanc at sunset? Living this unique experience, enjoying “the most impressive features of the scenery” is only accessible for Stephen by actually climbing the summit. But achieving the difficult ascent would not have been a complete gratifying experience without the contemplation of the sunset from the very top of the mountain and without getting fully immersed in the very heart of the landscape. The huge canvases painted by Loppé, because he placed his tiny, ant-looking characters at the centre of his immense landscapes of snow and ice, are no doubt revealing of the emotion shared by the two rope companions but can only remain an imperfect translation of their feelings.

Immersion and co-presence with a sensory universe

French anthropologist David Le Breton in *Anthropologie du corps et modernité* stresses the vital necessity for man to ensure “an organic continuity between his sensory perceptions and his immediate environment” (Le Breton 1990: 102). Some of the British alpinists of the 19th century, such as Leslie Stephen or Alfred Wills, had sensed that their mountaineering activities, allowed them to re-discover and re-capture a deeper link with the universe. In the same way as David Le Breton celebrates walking because it “sends you back to the sensation of the self, to the quivering of things, and restores the scale of values that collective routines tend to prune”, mountain physical activities, when not aimed at exploits, offer “full sensory experience without neglecting any one of our senses” (ibid.2000: 31).

The emergence and development of new leisure mountain activities in the 19th century, whether it was walking or climbing, participated in the building of a renewed relationship with nature. What the eye saw could be completed with tactile and kinaesthetic sensations for hand-to-hand combat between climbers and rock. Walkers, immersed in the scenery, became permeated with the odours of the forest, of the rain or the snow, perceived the rustling of leaves, the murmur of a stream or the rumbling of a waterfall swollen by a rainstorm.

The rich multi-sensory experience in a universe in which time seems to stand still, created new commitments, described by John Urry as “place obligations” and “time obligations” (Urry 2002). Regarding alpinist Alfred Wills’ case, his attraction for the mountains corresponded to a quest for quality-time intervals, which allowed escape in time and space from a tense and exhausting professional life, helped him to recover “the quivering of things” and to access the sensorial universe denied to him in his everyday ordinary life. To satisfy his need for co-presence with the mountains, he had his chalet The Eagle’s Nest built on the isolated Plateau des Fonds, in the region of Sixt in Haute Savoie in 1860. It may be argued that the project of building a summer residence there had alpine physical training as its

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2 Ruskin’s own words.
3 My translation.
4 My translation.
5 My translation.
only goal. But would it be sufficient to account for Wills’ emotion when discovering the site of his future chalet?

It was in the month of August, 1857, that I first saw the Plateau des Fonds. I was descending from the summit of the Buet in company with Balmat and an English friend. The scenery struck us as uncommon in character and unique in beauty, and as we stood at the edge of the level ground, it passed through my mind what a glorious site it would be for a chalet. A day or two afterwards we both wished to revisit the spot, for we could neither of us call to mind in our Alpine experiences a view that had pleased us equally. Finding that our second visit did but strengthen our impressions of the rare beauty of the scenery, the passing thought of the former day returned, and began to assume the character of a definite wish. (Wills 1860: 95)

The delight felt by Wills is echoed in the letters he wrote to his fiancée Bertha in late August and early September 1861: “This place grows upon me daily. It is the most enchanted spot conceivable by nature” (The Eagle’s Nest, 1 September 1861).

His need for total immersion in this ideal space is evident from other letters: “I can’t tell you the impatience I feel to be back among my mountains (11 sept 1861),

or from extracts of his book: “The Eagle’s Nest” in the Valley of Sixt published in 1860: “… when chance took me into the valley, I found it so beautiful that thenceforward I hardly knew how to keep away from it” (Wills, 1860:1).

Are words sufficient to convey emotion?

Alfred’s wife and children came to spend the summer there from the end of June to late September every year from 1862. An annex had to be added to accommodate relatives and friends. Alfred himself had to wait until the end of August to meet them. The photos in the family albums reveal a modern and comfortable chalet, strangely situated on a plateau surrounded with precipices, waterfalls and passes. Up to twenty people can be seen standing on the grass or sitting in armchairs, reading or drawing, while other characters are leaning out of the windows in an attitude of contemplation of the landscape. The pictures show us a quiet life spent in walks and picnics, reading and drawing, or gardening. The letters describe a country-like life beside the peasants making hay or busy with their corn fields, in a resounding concert of cow and goat bells. But the chalet inhabitants’ gaze invariably returns to the scenery. Wills’ second wife Bertha wrote in one of her letters to her mother-in-law in August 1862: “There are plenty of lovely strolls that suit my capabilities within easy reach. Every turn is full of beauty,” adding further on: “We lose the sun soon after six, and often see the surrounding rocks lit up by the beautiful rosy rays which rest on them for a short time before it leaves us altogether”. The fittest of the guests would walk and climb at night by candlelight to reach one of the nearest passes and have “a fine view of Mont Blanc” in the rising sun.

Wills himself was carried away at the sight of the varying hues and colours of the rocks at different times of day:

The rock is a light-brown weather-stained limestone..., as the kindling rays caught its surface and rapidly descended its shaggy sides, violet, then pink, then brilliant, like new gold; beneath the mid-day sun I have seen it looking rich and brown, but most glorious in the glow of declining day, bathed in floods of warmer radiance-now yellow, now all on fire with rosy light, 6

6 John Wills’ private collection.
7 John Wills’ private collection.
8 Alfred Wills’ first wife Lucy had designed the plans of the chalet but died before it was completed.
now of a soft sepia tint, and then at length settling once more into the iron hues of dusk. (Wills, 1860: 21-22)

Photography

Like Stephen, Alfred Wills also felt that words and pictures could only imperfectly communicate his intimate aesthetic emotion: “I can’t describe the grandeur of the views”, he wrote in one of his letters to Bertha, (30 August 1861). He even felt inclined to abandon the task:

I have often reached the Chalets des Fonds from Sixt in an hour and a half; but it is at once so grand and so full of softer beauty, it presents so many varied aspects of the finest mountain scenery, that I feel almost disposed to lay down the pen and abandon the effort in despair. (Wills, 1860: 71-72)

Would photography then help him to capture and transmit true-life experience? Overcome by intense excitement for the technical means that would enable him to seize these marvellous sceneries, Alfred Wills set out what he called his “photographic expeditions”. He used to choose a spot where he pitched his tent and made his equipment ready on the night preceding the operation, spending the whole of the following day taking photographs, hardly thinking of eating or drinking: “I have often to run nearly half a mile from the operating tent to the spot I have chosen and back again as quickly as possible in order that the sensitive surface may not get dry” (21 Sept 1861). Using the photographic collodion process invented by his compatriot Scott Archer in 1851, he had to take the pictures before the photographic emulsion on the plates got dry and to develop them straight away.

However chasing images had also its limitations owing to weather and light conditions. On fine days, Wills would exclaim: “the beauty of some of those (photographs) I have done is really marvellous” (1 Sept 1861). From one day to the next, success was not so great: “The other days were not satisfactory and I am a little puzzled to know why” (30 August 1861).

The preparation of the chemicals was a difficult operation:

The mixtures I am using now have a delicacy which the original samples I brought from home want. They are not quite so sensitive and the quantity of chemical or active light in the visual ray is diminishing rapidly with the advance of the season: so that a subject for which a month or 3 weeks ago an exposure of 5 or 10 seconds was sufficient now requires from 2 to 3 minutes”. (15 Sept 1861)

The quality of the plates was not always satisfactory: “I am sorry to say that the glasses sent to me from Geneva are absolutely worthless, and I cannot use one of them – so that I am reduced to the expedient of demolishing my worst pictures, which I meant however to keep, and doing fresh ones on the glasses on which they once were” (15 Sept 1861).

And finally the equipment was heavy for the walkers to bear: “I was carrying some 23 lbs on my back” (21 September 1861).

In a last faithful attempt at transcribing landscapes and images of the landscapes, Wills experimented with stereoscopic photography, one of the last innovations of his time. The device, which had been invented by another compatriot Charles Wheatstone in 1838, created the illusion of depth in the photograph by presenting a slightly different image to each eye. In the same collection of letters to Bertha we learn that he will bring her his most successful photographs “in the shapes of stereoscopes” (1 Sept 1861). Another description in his book reveals his familiarity with the process:
I had shouldered the camera when we parted with the horse, and felt myself well rewarded for the trouble of bringing it up by the meeting at last with an exquisite little picture just suited for the stereoscope. The dashing rivulet, with its broken, stony bed, the rough and dripping troughs along which the water was carried to the mill, the stacks of sawn timber, some arranged in the form of an inverted V, others built up in squares, each presenting those alternating lines of light and shade which always look beautiful in photography, backed by the jagged tops of the pine forests, with the white glaciers and the sharp peak in the distance, made just such a composition as possesses all the elements of an effective stereoscopic picture. (Wills, 1860: 68)

**Sketches and photographs**

When *The Eagle’s Nest* was published in 1860, it was dedicated to the memory of Wills’ first wife Lucy. She, who had developed a passionate interest in the project of the chalet, who had designed the plans herself, would never be able to see it completed as she was to die of tuberculosis in the same year. Some of her sketches she had taken on the site – she called it “the sketcher’s paradise” – appeared in the first edition of the *The Eagle’s Nest*. Alfred could only confess to the superiority of the artist’s drawing over the photographer when comparing his photographs and Lucy’s sketches, especially in the passage devoted to the description of the site of the Fer à cheval:

Three or four miles above Sixt you come to one of the most curious and interesting scenes of the district. The great wall of precipice forming the southern barrier of the valley suddenly recedes from the course of the river, and curving round a semicircle, becomes the boundary of an enormous amphitheatre of unparalleled wildness and sublimity.

I tried in vain so to plant my camera as to get a satisfactory picture from the truth-telling pencil of the sun.

A sketch taken by my wife,…, which lies before me as I write, conveys entirely this impression. (Wills, 1860: 32-34)

Lucy’s presence in some of her own drawings may seem strange but it is also revealing of her wish to become part of the landscape of the Plateau des Fonds and be united with the source of her emotion. For she sometimes completed her sketches after the photographs taken by her husband. Image within image, mirror of the couple’s emotion, these drawings offer a double representation of their idyll with a universe that they share beyond death. Beyond “the evidential force” possessed by the photograph (Barthes, 1982 : 89) which authenticates the presence of objects and characters within the landscape, we cannot help being deeply moved by Lucy’s drawings since they testify of “a defeat of Time: *that* is dead and *that* is going to die” telling us with certainty “death in the future” (Barthes : 96). Her sketches remain images of an absolute past whose characters are no more but they are images through which the living, although deprived of “the truth-telling of the sun”, try to appropriate the eyesight and the pencil touch of those who have departed.

**Today’s British in the Alps**

Are today’s British mountain lovers so different from their mountaineering elders? The same urge for true-to-life emotion experienced when just “being there” is still present among some of the British people interviewed in the Chamonix valley between June 2004 and
December 2005 and renewed contacts with British residents up to now. Rapture in the face of nature’s wonders, the quest for immersion in this landscape of mountain and ice, can be perceived in their discourse. All confess to their fascination for the site. L. confided that she contemplates Mont Blanc at length every morning while M. told about the first time she had come to Chamonix and spent hours sitting on a balcony “just looking”, unable to detach her gaze from the scenery. The mountain makes her “feel inspired”, she concluded. E. said that after climbing a number of different mountains all over the world, he has always returned to Chamonix: “nowhere else can you find mountains like here”, he explained. N. spoke of the “visual extravagance” of the site and S. said that “everything is different here”, both of them expressing the urge to experience the extraordinary in contrast to the ordinariness of everyday life (Urry, 1990).

While these testimonies abound in visual impressions and perceptions, others reveal the intensity of the “full” sensory experience, especially when practising alpine sports:

You ask about the sound of snow on/under skis. Well - it entirely depends upon the snow! You know how sometimes it’s crunchy, or squeaky - it is the same under skis/skins. Most often the sounds one experiences when away from people, skinning, is silence, the sounds of your body, the breath, the blood pumping. Sometimes, on perfect new light powder one does have the sensation of swishing through the snow, and the sound and the feeling merge into elation. I think this is often exactly the ‘soft hissing’ moment! (Roots, 2007)

Following the tradition of their elders, drawing, painting, photographing and climbing or walking, I have also met some British artists who have settled in the valley whether as seasonal or permanent residents. They seem to have acquired an awareness of their role in expressing their relationship to the landscape which was just beginning to dawn on their predecessors in the 19th century.

An awareness first of the part played by the corporeal sensations. For Carie who walks regularly, it is the entire body that seems to inhabit space and time.

The walking down quite quickly descends between larch and birch, on a smooth well beaten path. Within a short distance, we hear our footfalls; birdsong and swooshing melt-water take the place of voices. … As the land drops steeply, so the smooth path gives way to giant boulders, tree-roots, footholds spaced for giants. The distance between eye and ground is constantly extended, seeking the way to join the pattern of the path. It is not only our feet which make contact with the objects of the path. Our hands reach out for trees, rocks, steadying, seeking instinctive physical affirmation of being there. (Roots: 26-7)

An awareness that the walker’s body can become the first instrument of record:

In a place framed by visual extravagance, I admit to having a very visual sense of myself as some kind of instrument of record and registration (in metaphoric terms) moving within it; (Roots: 2)

Especially as both a writer and an artist, Carie finds responses to her corporeal experience of “being there” in the act of creating, blending writing and drawing, reciprocally feeding one with the other:

Qualitative survey conducted with 50 French and British interviewees in the Chamonix area from June 2004 to December 2005 and regularly updated in the following years, and quantitative survey with 85 questions after Marie-Martine Gervais-Aguer’s 2004 model questionnaire used in her own survey in the Aquitaine region.
As an artist, it seems quite natural to draw ideas, to find a visual response to the way one is thinking. In this case, the sketch, a simple line drawing, has formed the metaphoric backbone of my written work. The drawing then, acts as a guide. This writing depends on being there. It is the way in which one is there, and how the reality of this experience prompts responses, which form the writing. (Roots: 3)

While Carie owns a second residence in the valley, other British artists have chosen to settle there permanently. Among them, one of the leading figures is Andy Parkin who has been living in the valley for over twenty years. Like Carie the walker, Andy the climber relates the corporeal experience with the act of creating: “For me, being an artist and a climber at the same time results from the same desire for creation. Getting lost in the act of climbing or painting (or sculpting) is the essential justification allowing me to feel the changes through these identical experiences”. (original en français : Pour moi, être à la fois artiste et alpiniste résulte du même désir de création. Me perdre dans l’acte de grimper ou de peindre (ou sculpter) est une justification nécessaire qui me permet de ressentir les changements par ces mêmes expériences).

The changes undergone by Andy are linked to a serious accident he met with when working as a guide in the Swiss Alps. He admits that his approach to the mountain has never been the same since. Forced to remain inactive for several months, he developed different but complementary perceptions of the landscape. His approach now encompasses the gaze of the crystal seeker together with that of the chamois hunter, requiring acute eyesight at the same time as sensory watchfulness, patience and thinking. His world “whether climbing or whilst creating art is one of expression”, he says: “as both acts are creative and expressive. … This ultimately becomes a way of living”. Andy, a member of the Alpine Club as an alpinist, is very proud of being also registered in the book of the artists of the Club.

Times have changed since the first regulations were issued in 1857 indicating that “The members will occasionally dine together at their own expense, but the funds of the Club will be made available when on suitable occasions the Club is favoured by the presence of geographical explorers, or by that of other guests of celebrity.”

After revision of some of its rules in 2001, the mission statements have been reaffirmed:

The object of the Alpine Club is to promote mountain climbing and exploration throughout the world, develop a better knowledge of the mountains through literature, science and art and through its meetings and publications, encourage protection of the mountain environment, and conserve the Club’s heritage.

Alpine Club Rule 2, as revised 2001

Guests of celebrity were indeed invited by the Club from the start, among whom Gabriel Loppé whose paintings were regularly exhibited in London as early as 1873. The French artist because he was both a painter and an alpinist justified the views of the Club claiming that only those who had direct experience of mountaineering could convey the “the mountain truth” contrary to Ruskin who thought he could live authentic experience of the mountains by mere vision and contemplation.

Nowadays by setting up these new regulations, the Alpine Club has clearly reaffirmed the role of artists as full members of the Club. Moreover by organizing in 2007 an exhibition of the living artists of the Alpine Club on the 150th anniversary of its foundation, coinciding with the publication of an illustrated biographical dictionary of its artists, the Club

10 Alpine Club website : <www.alpine-club.org.uk>
is clearly recognizing that climbing and mountaineering cannot be estranged from art and literature. The corporeal experience resulting from the immersion in such an extraordinarily rich sensory universe finds its complete expression in words and images, in the “embracing relationship” (Le Breton, 2006: 15) of writers and artists with the world.

Bibliography

Alpine Club, Internet website : www.alpine-club.org.uk
Wills collection: John Wills’ private collection of the photographs and letters of his forbear Alfred Wills (1828-1912). The letters are deposited in Chamonix at the library of the “Amis du Vieux Chamonix”.
