

Albert Smith, the Alpine Club, and the Invention of Mountaineering in Mid-Victorian Britain

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On August 12, 1851, Albert Smith, a middle-aged journalist and entertainer, reached the summit of Mont Blanc with three Oxford students and sixteen guides. Smith and his companions were not the first people to climb Mont Blanc, the highest peak in the Alps. In 1786, two Chamonix natives climbed the peak, but over the next sixty-seven years the ascent of Mont Blanc was repeated only forty-five times. Yet after Albert Smith's dramatic account of this ascent made mountain climbing popular among the middle classes of Victorian England, Mont Blanc was climbed eighty-eight times in a five-year span.¹ In 1852, John Murray's *Handbook for Travellers in Switzerland*, the bible for English tourists abroad, noted that the ascent "of Albert Smith, in 1851, has effectually popularized the enterprise." While this could be construed as praise of Smith, it sounded very faint indeed when Murray asserted, "it is a somewhat remarkable fact that a large proportion of those who have made this ascent have been persons of unsound mind." By 1858, however, Murray mentioned that twenty or thirty people now made the ascent each year, thanked Albert Smith for his help with the text, and purged all references to the mental health of mountaineers.²

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¹ See Albert Smith, *The Story of Mont Blanc* (London, 1852). For a reliable reconstruction of Mont Blanc ascents through 1854, see Thomas Graham Brown and Gavin DeBeer, *The First Ascent of Mont Blanc* (Oxford, 1957), pp. 433-42; for an early list, see Stephen d'Arve [Camille de Catelin], *Histoire du Mont Blanc et de la Vallée de Chamonix* (Paris, 1878), pp. 458-90.

² John Murray, *Handbook for Switzerland* (London, 1838), pp. 298-99; 5th ed. (1852), p. 336; 7th ed. (1856), p. 354; 8th ed. (1858), p. 354.

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Over the next decade, Murray's *Handbook* recorded numerous first ascents in the Alps during what later became known as the "Golden Age" of mountaineering. This article attempts to explain why mountaineering became popular during these years and to suggest the broader significance of mountaineering to the construction of new middle class and imperial cultures. Mountaineering was invented at the intersection of contemporary definitions of middle-class gentility and status, gender, and national identity. In his personality, performances, and popularity, Albert Smith embodied a set of related social and cultural changes which the middle-class members of the Alpine Club later institutionalized as a form of imperial exploration in Victorian mountaineering.

Early accounts attributed the popularity of mountaineering to the extension of the railways and prevalence of a romantic sensibility.³ Railways and steamships slashed the length of time and expense of the journey to Switzerland. In the mid-1830s, the journey by carriage from London to Switzerland still took about two weeks and cost at least twenty pounds. By the mid-1850s, railways and steamers cut the time to just three days and the cost to just a few pounds.⁴ But the mere presence of the railways cannot explain why mountaineering increased in popularity at this time. Access to the Alps did not provide a motive for climbing them. Likewise, the cults of the sublime and picturesque had inspired tourists since the eighteenth century to visit the mountain regions of Europe during the Grand Tour.⁵ British tourists in Switzerland had cultivated their appreciation for the Alpine landscape for several generations without stepping far away from the comforts of Swiss hotels, let alone onto remote mountain summits. To be sure, many mid-Victorian climbers enjoyed the same aesthetic and religious responses to the Alps as many of their predecessors or contemporaries who did not climb. Yet, for that very reason, the romantic appreciation of nature also cannot explain why British tourists began to climb in the Alps during the mid-Victorian decades.

³ See Leslie Stephen, *The Playground of Europe* (London, 1871), pp. 1–68; C. D. Cunningham and W. Abney, *Pioneers of the Alps* (London, 1887), pp. 1–51; and Frederick Pollock in *Mountaineering*, ed. C. T. Dent (London, 1892). Later works in this tradition include Ronald W. Clark, *The Victorian Mountaineers* (London, 1953); Arnold Lunn, *A Century of Mountaineering, 1857–1957* (London, 1957); and Walt Unsworth, *Hold the Heights: The Foundations of Mountaineering* (London, 1993).

⁴ Johann Gottfried Ebel, *A Traveller's Guide Through Switzerland* (London, 1820), p. xiv; W. A. B. Coolidge, *Swiss Travel and Swiss Guidebooks* (London, 1889), pp. 72, 182–83; and various editions of John Murray's *Handbook for Travellers*.

⁵ See John Pemble, *The Mediterranean Passion: Victorians and Edwardians in the South* (Oxford, 1987); and James Buzard, *The Beaten Track: European Tourism, Literature, and the Ways to "Culture," 1800–1918* (Oxford, 1993).

More recent works rightly identify mountaineering with middle-class culture. Paul Veyne notes that climbing mountains had no appeal to peasants, rural landlords, or aristocrats and that the sport could not have developed until a class appeared—the bourgeoisie—which was methodical and took its sports seriously. Veyne argues that the British middle classes viewed mountaineering as a character-building exercise. Bruce Haley's discussion of the Victorian intelligentsia's anxieties about the healthy body subsumes mountaineering into the narrower traditions of *mens sana in corpore sano* and muscular Christianity. David Robbins argues that by fusing elements of scientism, athleticism, and romanticism, mountaineering facilitated the social interaction of different fractions of the upper and middle classes and consolidated bourgeois hegemony.⁶ Yet by positing a functional relationship between the emergence of the middle class and its "need" for character building, healthy bodies, or hegemony, these class-based analyses underestimate the contingent nature of middle-class identities and the ways in which they were contested and shaped by changing definitions of gender, gentility, and national identity.⁷

Considered in this context, the history of mountaineering suggests the need to rethink recent interpretations of the mid-Victorian middle class and imperial cultures. Public school athleticism, it is often argued, diffused the imperial ethos among the upper middle classes.⁸ But the influence of athleticism in these years has been overgeneralized and exaggerated. In his account of middle-class sport, for example, John Lowerson recommends "a diffusionist model which it is difficult not to accept, one in which the spread is downward and outward from the reformed public schools and their imitators."⁹ Similarly, popular imperial culture is often portrayed in recent accounts as little more than upper-class "propaganda," perpetuating the myth that the middle

⁶ Paul Veyne, "L'alpinisme: une invention de la bourgeoisie," *L'Histoire*, no. 11 (April 1979): 41–49; Bruce Haley, *The Healthy Body and Victorian Culture* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978); David Robbins, "Sport, Hegemony and the Middle Class: The Victorian Mountaineers," *Theory, Culture and Society* 4 (1987): 579–601. See also David Robertson, "Mid-Victorians amongst the Alps," in *Nature and the Victorian Imagination*, ed. U. C. Knoepfelmacher and G. B. Tennyson (Berkeley, 1977), pp. 113–36; and Paul P. Bernard, *The Rush to the Alps: The Evolution of Vacations in Switzerland* (Boulder, 1978), pp. 28–43.

⁷ For a survey which addresses these issues, see Richard Holt, *Sport and the British: A Modern History* (Oxford, 1989).

⁸ J. A. Mangan, *Athleticism and the Victorian and Edwardian Public Schools: The Emergence and Consolidation of an Educational Ideology* (Cambridge, 1981); and recent volumes edited by Mangan.

⁹ John Lowerson, *Sport and the English Middle Classes, 1870–1914* (Manchester, 1993), p. 72.

classes—and, more generally, British culture—feebly followed aristocratic fashion.¹⁰ But as historians of leisure have come to accept, the problem with such models of “diffusion” and “social control” is that they overlook the ways in which identities are self-generated and culturally constructed.¹¹

In the most important recent discussion of these issues, P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins argue that this period witnessed the cultural consolidation of “gentlemanly capitalism” as the social agent of British imperialism. The alliance between the landed interest and the City of London, which had dominated the British polity in the eighteenth century, was transformed in the mid-nineteenth century by a new gentlemanly order based on the rapid growth of the service sector, particularly in southeast England. Downplaying the influence of manufacturing and industry, Cain and Hopkins nevertheless resolutely emphasize the domestic origins of imperialism, as “an integral part of the configuration of British society.” Yet their argument, too, often reduces “gentlemanly capitalists” to the instrument of older financial and aristocratic interests: “the middle class gentleman was co-opted into the struggle against radicalism and its looming consequence, democracy.”¹² The reformed public schools and universities also figure prominently in their account as the critical transmitters of gentlemanly values.¹³ While Cain and Hopkins are surely correct to draw attention to the importance of financial services and returns on overseas investments, their account is more successful in defining those elements that made this new culture capitalist than those that made it gentlemanly. In their account of gentility, for example, gender is conspicuous by its absence. Moreover, the broad temporal and geographical sweep of Cain and Hopkins’s work, despite its many virtues for their overall argument, obscures the specific linguistic forms and cultural contexts that explain why the mid-Victorian decades represented such a dynamic turning point for the cultural definition of gentility.

The invention of mid-Victorian mountaineering demonstrates that

¹⁰ See John M. Mackenzie, *Propaganda and Empire: The Manipulation of Public Opinion (1880–1960)* (Manchester, 1985); and the debate generated by Martin Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit* (Cambridge, 1980).

¹¹ See F. M. L. Thompson, “Social Control in Victorian Britain,” *Economic History Review*, 2d ser., 34 (1981): 189–208; Peter Bailey, “Leisure, Culture and the Historian: Reviewing the First Generation of Leisure Historiography in Britain,” *Leisure Studies* 8 (1989): 107–27; and Hugh Cunningham, “Leisure and Culture,” in *The Cambridge Social History of Britain, 1750–1950*, ed. F. M. L. Thompson (Cambridge, 1990), 2:279–339.

¹² P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism: Innovation and Expansion, 1688–1914* (London, 1993), pp. 46, 33.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 31–34, 122–23.

middle-class men were not co-opted, nor did they passively receive an older gentlemanly culture, but instead they actively constructed an assertive masculinity to uphold their imagined sense of Britain's imperial power. Albert Smith's entertaining narrative uncoupled the Alps from the romantic appreciation of nature and inspired ambitious men of the professional middle classes to climb Mont Blanc. During a "decade of crisis" from the mid-1850s to the mid-1860s, middle-class men experienced anxiety that Britain was transforming itself into a wealthy but unmanly society.¹⁴ By the 1860s, these anxieties were translated into more aggressive forms of middle-class gentlemanly culture such as mountaineering in the Alps. Middle-class mountaineers adopted the languages of exploration and adventure from contemporary explorers in the Arctic and Africa to describe their climbing. These languages transformed the ascent of unclimbed Alpine peaks and passes into representations of British masculinity and imperial "conquest." The Matterhorn became the focal point of these trends, and its first ascent in 1865 marked the end of the "Golden Age" of mountaineering.

I

In the spring following his ascent, Albert Smith mounted a one-man show on his ascent of Mont Blanc at the Egyptian Hall, Piccadilly. Smith's performance was the latest in a tradition of popular shows and panoramas which combined entertainment with instruction.¹⁵ Smith brought an irreverent sense of humor to lampoon current events and to impersonate the guidebook-toting tourists who misquoted Byron at the sight of Mont Blanc:

Mont Blanc is the Monarch of Mountains,
They crowned him long ago;
But who they got to put it on,
We don't exactly know.¹⁶

¹⁴ For the phrase "decade of crisis," see Ronald Hyam, *Britain's Imperial Century, 1815–1914* (New York, 1976), pp. 70–85.

¹⁵ See J. Monroe Thornton, *Mont Blanc Sideshow: The Life and Times of Albert Smith* (Philadelphia, 1934); Raymond Fitzsimons, *The Baron of Piccadilly: The Travels and Entertainments of Albert Smith, 1816–1860* (London, 1967); and Richard D. Altick, *The Shows of London* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978).

¹⁶ Walter Goodman, *The Keeleys on Stage and at Home* (London, 1885), p. 228. Byron's lines in *Manfred* (I.i.60–63) read: "Mont Blanc is the monarch of mountains, / They crowned him long ago / On a throne of rocks, in a robe of clouds, / With a diadem of snow."

Smith festooned the stage with “chamois skins, Indian corn, Alpenstocks, vintage baskets, knapsacks, and other appropriate matters.” At the intermission, Saint Bernard dogs lumbered through the room with chocolates in barrels under their necks.¹⁷

This entertaining alchemy turned Smith’s ascent into box-office gold. During his first two seasons, Smith performed before nearly 200,000 people, with gross receipts of over £17,000. By the end of 1853, *The Times* wrote that Smith’s show “seems now to be one of the ‘sights of London’—like St. Paul’s and Westminster Abbey and the Monument.” Smith gave several command performances, and he even served as an Alpine guide for the Prince of Wales on the glaciers in Chamonix. Smith earned a fortune from his show, much of it from a plethora of Mont Blanc merchandise, including coloring books, fans, games, and miniature Mont Blancs. After six years and two thousand performances, Smith closed his “Mont Blanc” show in 1858.¹⁸

What made Smith’s show so popular? Smith encouraged his audience to imagine themselves in Switzerland, making their own ascent of Mont Blanc. *The Times* thought the ascent was “more pleasantly performed in imagination” at the Egyptian Hall than on the mountain itself.¹⁹ Consider the following description of Smith, possibly from a press release written by his publicist:

[Smith’s] unquestioned ability as a lecturer, his rapid but distinct utterance, his genuine humour, his keen sense of the ridiculous as exhibited in that fish out of water—John Bull abroad—and his well-selected and well-painted scenery, conspired with his careful attention to the comfort of his audience, to enable him to achieve an unprecedented success, so that every man or woman, boy or girl, who has visited the metropolis during the past six years, has been able to “do” the ascent of Mont Blanc by deputy, and to realise it to him (or her) self pretty nearly as if he (or she, as the case may be) had climbed upon the snowy side of that king of European mountains, had crossed his awful ravines, had heard the thunder of his avalanches, and sat upon the summit to enjoy the view of his rosy peaks of his brother mountains at dawn of day, and to drink a

¹⁷ *Illustrated London News* 21 (December 25, 1852): 565; *Punch* 24 (June 18, 1853): 254; and Thorington, *Mont Blanc Sideshow*, p. 168.

¹⁸ *Illustrated London News* 23 (December 10, 1853): 494; and *The Times* (September 18, 1854), (December 6, 1853); Thorington, *Mont Blanc Sideshow*, pp. 157, 180, 188. T. S. Blakeney, “Mountaineering and the British Royal Family,” *Alpine Journal* 59 (1953–54): 279. Smith’s advertisements included lists of notables who had attended the show: Egyptian Hall File, Theatre Museum, London. Mike Simkin, “Albert Smith: A Nineteenth Century Showman,” *New Magic Lantern Journal* 4 (1986): 68–71.

¹⁹ *The Times* (November 30, 1852).

glass of champagne, then and there, to the health of Her Gracious Majesty Queen Victoria.²⁰

Smith's representation of his climb on stage was so successful because he transformed the passive enjoyment of scenery into a vicarious ascent of Mont Blanc. Smith was soon flattered by many imitators who followed his footsteps to the summit, in what was truly a case of life imitating art.

Why was Albert Smith able to exert this influence? Smith's Mont Blanc show gave one of many possible middle-class self-images a specific cultural form. The economic prosperity and expansion of the professional middle classes during the mid-Victorian years precipitated an increased competition for status symbols which Albert Smith channeled into mountain climbing. While the "making of the middle classes" is often dated back into the eighteenth century, by the mid-nineteenth century, structural changes in both the industrial and the service sectors of the economy had concentrated unprecedented wealth and power in the hands of the professional middle classes of London and a few provincial cities.²¹ Although such structural changes may have shaped the broad outlines of this "class in search of an image,"²² constructions of middle-class identities were characterized as much by confusion and contingent circumstances as by functional forces. Social change provided the opportunity for, but did not dictate the content of, the expanded range of cultural codes of status, gentility, and masculinity. As J. A. Banks noted, the remarkable increase in middle-class expenditure on the "paraphernalia of gentility" was the result "not so much of a rise in the price of the material ingredients of the middle class way of living but an extension of the number and form of these ingredients."²³ More recent historians appear to have unduly neglected the role of Albert Smith and other celebrities and entrepreneurs in determining the patterns of middle-class leisure and culture.

²⁰ British Library, Add. MSS 35027, fol. 122; and the New York Public Library, Theatre Collection, Albert Smith, clipping file. Partially printed in *Alpine Journal* 41 (1929): 250–51.

²¹ For a recent account, see Cain and Hopkins, pp. 107–28; on the professions, see W. J. Reader, *Professional Men: The Rise of the Professional Classes in Nineteenth Century England* (London, 1966), pp. 207–11. For the earlier period, see the works of Peter Earle, Paul Langford, Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, Theodore Koditschek, R. J. Morris, and the articles in *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 32 (1993).

²² Mark Girouard, *Sweetness and Light: The "Queen Anne" Movement, 1860–1900* (Oxford, 1977), pp. 1–4.

²³ J. A. Banks, *Prosperity and Parenthood: A Study of Family Planning among the Victorian Middle Classes* (London, 1954), p. 101.

Before his Mont Blanc entertainment, Albert Smith had enjoyed modest success as a satirist for *Punch* and other journals by writing about this redefinition of gentility and leisure.²⁴ In *The Natural History of Stuck-up People*, Smith described the gentry who “partake largely of the nature of mushrooms—in as much as they have not only sprung up with great rapidity to their present elevation, but have also risen from mould of questionable delicacy.” Perhaps Smith’s best-known work in this genre was *The Natural History of the Gent*, one of the nineteenth century’s best-sellers. The Gent was a recycled version of the Regency Dandy, and he posed once again the age-old question: who was a gentleman? In *The Gent*, Smith described the accessories of false gentility “including always the staring shawl and the *al fresco* cigar [by which] you may know the Gent when you see him, even if you meet him on the top of Mont Blanc—a place, however, where you are not very likely to encounter him. He prefers Windmill Hill.”²⁵ The Gent was neither a gentleman nor a mountaineer.

While Thackeray and others wrote books on “bores” and “snobs” in the wake of Smith’s success, Smith’s brand of searing satire remained in a class by itself.²⁶ Consider Smith’s letter to his friend William Howard Russell, written to congratulate the journalist on the success of his book about the Indian mutiny. Smith did not mince his words, even if he did mix his metaphors: “What I especially love, is the view you have taken of the windbag snobbish conventional-ity of all the stuck-up dry-winded sweaty Anglo-Indians believing they are somebodies over there, instead of being a set of currie-brained, chutney-boweled, pawnee-swilling, chow-chow bloated, ‘boy’-bawling sons of prickly-heated bitches and be damned to them.”²⁷ No one could accuse Albert Smith of being mealymouthed. Smith’s Mont Blanc entertainment was an extension of, not a departure from, his earlier satirical work. Smith was so popular in part because both on

²⁴ See, e.g., Bodleian Library, MS.Eng.lett.d.398, fols. 70–84. For the context of Smith’s “Bohemian” journalism, see Nigel Cross, *The Common Writer: Life in Nineteenth Century Grub Street* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 90–125; compare “higher” journalism in Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain, 1850–1930* (Oxford, 1991).

²⁵ Albert Smith, *The Natural History of ‘Stuck-up’ People* (London, 1847), pp. viii. Richard D. Altick, “Nineteenth-Century English Best-Sellers: A Further List,” *Studies in Bibliography* 22 (1969): 205. Albert Smith, *The Natural History of the Gent* (New York, 1847), pp. 30–31.

²⁶ See Angus B. Reach, *The Natural History of ‘Bores’* (London, 1847); and William Makepeace Thackeray, *The Book of Snobs* (London, 1848).

²⁷ Albert Smith to William Howard Russell, n.d. [1860], Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection/Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations. New York Public Library.

stage and in print he blurred the boundaries between the genteel and the vulgar, the sacred and the profane.

Indeed, Smith's Mont Blanc performances contributed to the declining cultural authority of the picturesque and sublime in the Alps. In 1856, *The Times* wrote that "a perfect Mont Blanc mania pervades the minds of our countrymen": "Mont Blanc must share the fate of its predecessors. Its majesty is stale, its 'diadem of snow' a mere theatrical gimcrack, and its terrors under existing arrangements about as tremendous as the mysteries of the Thames Tunnel." According to the *Daily Telegraph*, "Piccadilly and Mont Blanc became allied, as it were, in the public mind, and it was impossible to think of one without associating it with the other."²⁸ A few arbiters of taste were unhappy that the Alps were no longer identified with genteel reverence for nature. John Ruskin, who had been in Chamonix when Smith returned from Mont Blanc, wrote at the time: "There has been a Cockney ascent of Mont Blanc, of which I believe you are soon to hear in London." During this period, the word "cockney" connoted a Londoner who was insular and vulgar, in contrast with someone who was educated and genteel.²⁹ By 1856, Herman Merivale, a permanent undersecretary for India, wrote that Zermatt was becoming "a second Chamonix; but with nothing, as yet, of the Cockneyism, the Albert Smithery, the fun, the frolic, and the vulgarity of that unique place of resort."³⁰ By undermining the authority of these older aesthetic categories, Albert Smith transformed people and practices that had once been considered vulgar into integral components of middle-class gentility.

This mid-Victorian redefinition of gentility has been recognized, but historians have underestimated the extent to which models of gentility came from the "middle up" as well as from the "top down." To be sure, Smith exploited a desire for social emulation. As *Town Talk* reported, "the very 'Stuck-up People' whom [Smith] so cruelly abused are now perhaps his warmest friends, the strings of carriages round the Egyptian Hall, and the knowledge that Royalty patronises the en-

²⁸ *The Times* (October 6, 1856); *Daily Telegraph* (May 24, 1860).

²⁹ Gareth Stedman Jones, "The 'Cockney' and the Nation, 1780–1988," in *Metropolis London: Histories and Representations since 1800*, ed. David Feldman and Gareth Stedman Jones (London, 1989), p. 289. This representation of the "vulgar" middle-class London tourist continued into the 1890s. See Piers Brendon, *Thomas Cook: 150 Years of Popular Travel* (London, 1991), pp. 81–100.

³⁰ E. T. Cook and A. Wedderburn, eds., *The Works of John Ruskin*, 39 vols. (London, 1909), 36:117–18. [Herman Merivale], "Alpine Travellers," *Edinburgh Review* 104 (1856): 446.

tainment, having for them the greatest attraction."³¹ But aspirants to gentility did not simply seek the traditional trappings of country life or ape those above them in the social scale. While many people did pursue these older status symbols, large numbers of middle-class families avoided conventional patterns of consumption and enhanced their standard of living through leisure activities that could not be described as aristocratic.³² They created distinctly middle-class cultures around new status symbols and leisure patterns, such as sports and summer holidays. Mountain climbing combined both of these to perfection. Ironically, the great scramble for social status that Albert Smith had lambasted with such force created precisely the social conditions which allowed mountaineering to prosper. Albert Smith literally turned social climbers into mountain climbers.

II

Albert Smith's Mont Blanc show closed its doors in 1858, and Smith himself died in 1860. Offstage, mountain climbing continued unabated, even if Mont Blanc itself was no longer the height of fashion. Why did mountain climbing continue to enjoy a popularity which outlived Albert Smith? Over the next decade, mountaineering developed into an aggressive, masculine sport under the institutional aegis of the Alpine Club, founded in London in 1857 "to facilitate association among those who possess a similarity of taste."³³

Who joined the Alpine Club? In 1858 Alfred Wills, a Birmingham barrister, thought that the Alpine Club looked "more like 'a set of long-legged men' than anything else."³⁴ A more prosaic analysis can be obtained from the *Alpine Club Register*, which provides detailed biographies of the 823 men who joined the club between 1857 and 1890.³⁵ To be eligible for election, aspiring members had to possess experience climbing in the Alps or evidence of literary or artistic ac-

³¹ *Town Talk* (October 3, 1859), in A. M. Broadley, *Bath and Piccadilly* (London, 1911), p. 203, Westminster Archives, Theatre Collection.

³² See Simon Gunn, "The 'Failure' of the Victorian Middle Class: A Critique," in *The Culture of Capital: Art, Power, and the Nineteenth-Century Middle Class*, ed. Janet Wolff and John Seed (Manchester, 1988), pp. 17-43.

³³ D. F. O. Dangar and T. S. Blakeney, "The Rise of Modern Mountaineering and the Formation of the Alpine Club," *Alpine Journal* 62 (1957): 26; and Alpine Club Archives, London, F7, B27, and B65.

³⁴ Alfred Wills to James David Forbes, July 18, 1858, St. Andrew's University Library, Forbes 1858/77.

³⁵ Arnold Louis Mumm, *The Alpine Club Register, 1857-1890*, 3 vols. (London, 1923-28). Mumm was partner in the publisher Edward Arnold and member of a family of well-known wine merchants.

TABLE 1
ALPINE CLUB MEMBERSHIP, 1857-90—PERCENTAGE IN EACH OCCUPATION

	1857-63	1864-76	1877-90	1857-90
Law	28.1	22.4	21.0	23.9
Business	17.4	22.8	26.2	22.0
Teaching	12.5	11.7	11.1	11.8
Civil service	8.5	10.7	6.3	8.6
Church	7.8	6.2	7.1	7.0
Gentlemen	6.4	5.9	4.8	5.7
Medicine	3.2	4.1	7.9	5.0
Military	2.8	6.2	3.2	4.1
Miscellaneous	9.6	8.3	7.9	8.6
Unknown	3.6	1.7	4.4	3.2
Total	100	100	100	100
Number	281	290	252	823

SOURCE.—A. L. Mumm, *Alpine Club Register, 1857-1890*, 3 vols. (London, 1923-28).

complishments related to mountains. A de facto social qualification also contributed to the genteel identity of the Alpine Club as “a club for gentlemen who also climb.”³⁶ These policies ensured that the social profile of the Alpine Club remained somewhat higher, and the number of its members much lower, than the mountaineering clubs founded throughout Europe in the 1860s and 1870s.³⁷ Thus, the *Alpine Club Register* represents not so much a comprehensive roster of all British mountain climbers as the social counterpart to the cultural construction of British mountaineering as a genteel sport.

The membership of the Alpine Club was drawn overwhelmingly from the professional middle classes, as shown in the table 1. In the mid-Victorian decades, membership in the Alpine Club was particularly attractive to what could be called the genteel professions, including bankers, barristers, civil servants, clergymen, country gentlemen,

³⁶ In 1935 a club officer declared the Alpine Club “a unique one—a club for gentlemen who also climb.” Pointing at a street sweeper in front of the Club on Saville Row, he added, “I mean that we would never elect that fellow even if he were the finest climber in the world.” See Scott Russell, “Mémorial,” in *The Making of a Mountaineer*, ed. George Ingle Finch, 2d ed. (Bristol, 1988), p. 10.

³⁷ By the 1870s, Alpine climbing was a European sport, not merely a British sport in Europe. Alpine clubs were founded in Switzerland (1863), Italy (1863), Austria (1869), Germany (1874), and France (1874). See Dominique Lejeune, *Les “alpinistes” en France à la fin du XIXe et au début du XXe siècle (vers 1875-1919)* (Paris, 1988), pp. 25-66; and Peter Holger Hansen, “British Mountaineering, 1850-1914” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1991), pp. 471-75.

university dons, and public schoolmasters. By the later nineteenth century, barristers and gentlemen with landed estates or independent wealth declined in number in the club, while doctors and businessmen—especially merchants and engineers—became more prominent. Throughout the period 1857–90, Alpine Club businessmen in finance and commerce each outnumbered those in industry, which appears to confirm a general pattern for British businessmen as a whole.³⁸ More significant than the sectoral distribution of businessmen, however, is the absence of all but a handful of aristocratic or working-class members. Miscellaneous occupations included only three men identified as Lancashire weavers, among the slightly larger numbers of architects, artists, librarians, scientists, and writers.

The contemporary perception that most members of the Alpine Club were well educated was well-founded. More than half of the men in the *Alpine Club Register* had gone to university. One in four attended Cambridge, one in five Oxford, and just under one in ten the University of London. Trinity College, Cambridge, was the most heavily represented of the Oxbridge colleges, with almost one in seven Alpine Club members calling it their alma mater. Slightly more than one in three of the climbers went to public schools, with nearly 10 percent of the total from Eton, 8 percent from Harrow, and 5 percent from Rugby.

Beyond recognizing the predominance of the professional middle classes, the diversity of the Alpine Club membership makes broader sociological generalizations difficult. The political or religious affiliations of the climbers ran across the spectrum. Nevertheless, the *Alpine Club Register* suggests that insofar as these men represented a particular section of the professional middle classes rather than that group as a whole, they were more likely to be Liberal Dissenters than Tory Anglicans. The cultural biases of climbers have often led them to assert that the club was primarily composed of clergymen, scientists, and dons, or what used to be called the “intellectual aristocracy.” In light of the above figures, however, the Alpine Club appears to be more representative of the larger and more diverse group of “gentlemanly capitalists.”³⁹ The Alpine Club was one of a number of national volun-

³⁸ W. D. Rubinstein, “The Victorian Middle Classes: Wealth, Occupation and Geography,” *Economic History Review*, 2d ser., 30 (1977): 602–23; and Stana Nenadic, “Businessmen, the Urban Middle Classes, and the ‘Dominance’ of Manufacturers in Nineteenth-Century Britain,” *Economic History Review*, 2d ser., 44 (1991): 66–85.

³⁹ An influential exponent of the older view is Clark, *Victorian Mountaineers* (n. 3 above). Noel Annan, “The Intellectual Aristocracy,” in *Studies in Social History*, ed. J. H. Plumb (London, 1955), pp. 241–87. On “gentlemanly capitalism,” see Cain and Hopkins (n. 12 above).

tary associations which constructed a public sphere for the socialization of men of diverse backgrounds.⁴⁰

The range of professional occupations and the modest number of climbers who received a public school education suggest that the philosophy of athleticism in the public schools had little direct influence on the emergence of mountaineering. Thomas Arnold could only dream of lecturing to audiences at Rugby as large as Albert Smith's. More people passed through the doors of the Egyptian Hall than competed on the playing fields of Eton. While the broad cultural influence that public school athleticism enjoyed later in the nineteenth century should not be underestimated—when a few masters and dons brought their students climbing with them—the public schools introduced few early climbers to the sport. Indeed, mountaineering and athleticism appear to have emerged independently at roughly the same time and from broadly similar causes.

Both mountaineering and athleticism cultivated manliness, a broad and diverse category in Victorian Britain which included elements of physical vigor or health, patriotic or military qualities, traditions of chivalry or honor, and moral or spiritual codes of conduct.⁴¹ Heroic and military qualities were especially resonant symbols of British national identity. The masculinity of the English as opposed to the effeminacy of the French had been a central trope in the cultural redefinition of the aristocracy and the upper echelons of British society during the wars against France and in the expansion of the empire during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.⁴² But it would be wrong to identify martial virtues as aristocratic values. These qualities were adapted even as they were adopted by middle-class men.

The members of the Alpine Club recast mountains and mountaineering in relation to masculinity and British power.⁴³ G. C. Swayne, a

⁴⁰ See R. J. Morris, "Clubs, Societies and Associations," in Thompson, ed. (n. 11 above), 3:395–443.

⁴¹ For examples of each, see Haley (n. 6 above); Mark Girouard, *The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman* (New Haven, Conn., 1981); Norman Vance, *Sinews of the Spirit: The Ideal of Christian Manliness in Victorian Literature and Religious Thought* (Cambridge, 1985); and Ronald Hyam, *Empire and Sexuality: The British Experience* (Manchester, 1990), esp. pp. 25–87.

⁴² Linda Colley, "Britishness and Otherness: An Argument," *Journal of British Studies* 31 (1992): 309–29, and *Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven, Conn., 1992), pp. 164–93, 251–53; Gerald Newman, *The Rise of English Nationalism: A Cultural History, 1740–1830* (New York, 1987); C. A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780–1830* (London, 1989), pp. 100–63; and Lawrence Stone, ed., *An Imperial State at War: Britain from 1689 to 1815* (London, 1994).

⁴³ Michael Roper and John Tosh, eds., *Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain since 1800* (London, 1991) p. 2, argue that masculinity is defined in relation to femininity and to social power and criticize recent historical works on manliness for leaving women

clergyman, noted that the danger of spending too much time in the “relaxations of effeminate pleasure” was increasing because the number of men of leisure “increases with our population and prosperity”: “Hundreds of high-spirited Britons, well educated, well mannered, with high tastes and sympathies, blest with abundant vigour, but with moderate means, find it impossible to gratify the national longing for sport within the old-established boundaries or in the time-honoured ways. Hence it has become necessary to search for new methods and scenes of sporting.”⁴⁴ These new sports drew on older traditions of manliness. The Scottish scientist James David Forbes, one of the Alpine Club’s first honorary members, recommended Switzerland as the proper place for “thousands of irreclaimable cockneys and Parisians” to cultivate “an out-of-door mind”: “An Alpine journey is perhaps the nearest approach to a campaign with which the ordinary civilian has a chance of meeting. He has some of the excitements, and many of the difficulties and privations of warfare, without any of its disgusting and dreadful features. He combats only the elements, storms only the fortresses of nature, yet he has continually in his mind the consciousness of the power by which he is surrounded, and at times overawed.”⁴⁵ British mountaineers appropriated some of the older cultural associations embodied in military service and field sports but rejected the older practices themselves. Most field sports, for example, were neither accessible enough nor cheap enough—and often simply too bloody—to satisfy the desire for vigorous exercise through sport. As Frederic Harrison, then a barrister, asked using an assertive language of conquest: “Can any man seriously compare the chase of a poor vermin-fox, with the zest of the attack on some untrodden pass, or the rapture of the race with that of conquering a new mountain-top?”⁴⁶

A series of military crises from the mid-1850s to mid-1860s undermined a complacent confidence in British manliness and power. The incompetent if heroic performance of the British military in the Crimean War, the massacres of the Indian Mutiny, the Second Opium War with China, the threat of invasion from France which led to the foundation of the Volunteer Corps in 1859-60, the conflicts with the

out. On women and mountaineering, see Hansen, “British Mountaineering,” pp. 275–324.

⁴⁴ [George Carless Swayne], “Mountaineering—the Alpine Club,” *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* 86 (1859): 456.

⁴⁵ [James David Forbes], “Pedestrianism in Switzerland,” *Quarterly Review* 101 (1857): 286–88.

⁴⁶ Frederic Harrison, “Mountaineering,” in his *My Alpine Jubilee, 1851–1907* (London, 1908), p. 108; reprinted from *Westminster Review* (October 1864).

Maori in New Zealand, the agitation over the American Civil War, and the controversy over Governor Eyre in Jamaica in the mid-1860s—each provoked anxiety and debate about the decline of British power.⁴⁷ In 1857, Viscount Palmerston privately complained that, throughout Europe, Britain was “talked of, and written of, and printed of as a second rate power.”⁴⁸ These events created a climate in which middle-class men elevated the exploits of athletes and the adventures of mountaineers into cultural symbols of British masculinity, patriotism, national character, and imperial power.

III

During the early 1860s, the rhetoric of exploration and discovery transformed British mountaineering in the Alps. After Albert Smith undermined the cultural associations which had limited leisure patterns in the Alps to a narrow range of aesthetic responses, the middle-class men of the Alpine Club invested their mountain climbing with new meanings. Many men who had first gone to the Egyptian Hall to experience vicariously the ascent of Mont Blanc soon went to the Alps to experience the thrill of imperial exploration and scientific discovery.

The Alpine Club itself had adopted its structure and terminology from the learned and scientific societies of London.⁴⁹ In the club's first publication, *Peaks, Passes, and Glaciers*, John Ball, a recently retired Liberal M.P., wrote that “an increasing desire has been felt to explore the unknown and little-frequented districts of the Alps.” Ball claimed that this desire was motivated by a blend of “love of adventure and some scientific interest in the results of mountain travel.”⁵⁰ But adventure predominated over science, which, in the gentlemanly, amateur tradition, consisted of brief excursions into botany, geology, meteorology, and photography. Although some climbers carried thermometers and barometers, they added little to the earlier scientific research in

⁴⁷ Among the many works on these events, see Hugh Cunningham, *The Volunteer Movement* (London, 1975); and Catherine Hall, “Competing Masculinities: Thomas Carlyle, John Stuart Mill and the Case of Governor Eyre,” in her *White, Male and Middle-Class: Explorations in Feminism and History* (New York, 1992), pp. 255–95.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Muriel E. Chamberlain, “‘Pax Britannica’?” *British Foreign Policy, 1789–1914* (London, 1988), p. 112.

⁴⁹ For a recent account of these societies, see Iwan Morus, Simon Schaffer, and Jim Secord, “Scientific London,” in *London—World City*, ed. Celina Fox (New Haven, Conn., 1992), pp. 129–42.

⁵⁰ John Ball, ed., *Peaks, Passes and Glaciers: a Series of Excursions by Members of the Alpine Club* (London, 1859), p. vi.

the Alps by Horace Bénédict de Saussure, Louis Agassiz, and James David Forbes.

Instead, the members of the Alpine Club focused their energies on the completion of first ascents. Ball noted with satisfaction that the Monte Rosa, the Dom, the Grand Combin, Alleleinhorn, and the Wetterhorn had all been ascended by Englishmen within the preceding five years. Reviews of *Peaks, Passes, and Glaciers* attributed the English dominance of Alpine climbing to the English-British national character. *Chambers's Journal* believed that the Alpine climbers "afford a very striking example of the pre-eminence of our own countrymen over all others in matters requiring determination, intrepidity, and skill." *Fraser's Magazine* reflected on "how thoroughly English all this is, and how indicative of that rambling, scrambling, exercise-loving disposition" of the English. "If there is talk of an unknown land into which no Englishman has penetrated," *The Times* observed, "he must be the first to visit the place."⁵¹

Recent expeditions to the Arctic and Africa had given wide currency to this discourse of discovery. Mid-nineteenth-century explorers aimed to enclose geographical space, to fill in blank spots on the map, especially in such fabled places as the Northwest Passage or the source of the Nile.⁵² Between 1848 and 1857, for example, well over a dozen parties were launched into the Arctic to find John Franklin. In Africa, expeditions by David Livingstone, Richard Francis Burton, and John Hanning Speke were also widely celebrated during this period. The Royal Geographical Society, founded in 1830, provided a prominent forum for these explorers to report on and gain recognition for their discoveries.⁵³

These Arctic and African expeditions provided the crucial vocabulary to describe mountain climbing. By adopting the language of explo-

⁵¹ *Chambers's Journal*, 3d ser., 12 (July 23, 1859): 63; *Fraser's Magazine* 60 (August 1859): 232; *Bentley's Quarterly Review* 2 (October 1859): 216; *Athenaeum* 33 (June 4, 1859): 738; *The Times* (October 7, 1859), p. 9. Some reviews were written by climbers and provide evidence of how they saw themselves as well as how they were seen by others. John Ball, who edited the volume under review, may have written the articles in both *Fraser's* and *Bentley's Quarterly*. See Walter E. Houghton, ed., *Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals* (Toronto, 1972), 2:445.

⁵² Compare Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London, 1992), pp. 15–37; and William H. Goetzmann, *New Lands, New Men: America and the Second Great Age of Discovery* (New York, 1986), pp. 97–126.

⁵³ See Beau Riffenburgh, *The Myth of the Explorer: The Press, Sensationalism, and Geographical Discovery* (New York, 1993), pp. 29–68; David N. Livingstone, *The Geographical Tradition* (Oxford, 1992); and Robert A. Stafford, *Scientist of Empire: Sir Roderick Murchison, Scientific Exploration and Victorian Imperialism* (Cambridge, 1989).

ration, British climbers imposed on themselves the task of climbing each of the major peaks of the Alps. As *The Times* wrote in a leading article on "Alpine Adventurers" in 1860:

We should be among the last to disparage any legitimate manifestation of the true Anglo-Saxon spirit. We know well that the acknowledged pluck of the individual Englishman maintains our *prestige* against all the alleged defects of our naval and military organization. The English tourist in Switzerland feels that he has a certain character to support. . . . It may be a strange and even fantastic direction for heroism to take but we are persuaded that the stuff that won and reconquered India and defended Gibraltar has left its mark on many a peak of the Bernese Oberland and the Pennine Alps.⁵⁴

The contemporary crises over the performance of the British military enhanced the importance of mountaineering and exploration as symbols of national prestige and identity. The exploration of unknown territory and the completion of first ascents became the highest aspiration of middle-class climbers.

The second series of *Peaks, Passes, and Glaciers* in 1862 demonstrated the language of exploration in full flower. The editor, E. S. Kennedy, a philanthropist, justified the new volume by pointing proudly to "the increase in the number of new ascents, new passes and new adventures, involving a far wider range of exploration." Kennedy hoped that a long essay on Iceland—the only area included from outside the Alps—would inspire others to visit the island, so that "the blank in the map of Iceland may speedily be filled up."⁵⁵

The climbers also described their first ascents in terms of the "conquest" of the Alps. Leslie Stephen, then a Cambridge don, noted in 1861 that the Schreckhorn "still remained unconquered." Stephen admitted that he was attracted to the Schreckhorn for the immortality the first ascent would bestow: "so long as Murray and Baedeker describe its wonders for the benefit of successive generations of tourists, its first conqueror may be carried down to posterity by clinging to its skirts."⁵⁶ This desire for fame was a prominent motive for first ascents. Consider the language of R. W. Elliot Forster, a barrister, who paused to decide which peak to ascend: "We held a council of war as to which

⁵⁴ *The Times* (August 29, 1860).

⁵⁵ E. S. Kennedy, ed., *Peaks, Passes, and Glaciers, being Excursions by Members of the Alpine Club*, 2d ser. (London, 1862), 1:v-vi.

⁵⁶ Kennedy, ed., 2:4; Stephen (n. 3 above), pp. 73-74.

was to be attacked; but when we heard from Weissenfluh [their guide] that the snow on the loftiest peak of the Thierberg had not yet been trodden by human foot, whereas the Sustenhorn had, as we knew, been ascended four or five times, it did not require much deliberation in order to determine what was to be done: so the word of command was given,—‘Right wheel, quick march!’ and we started for the Thierberg.”⁵⁷ Others followed this pattern, and many mid-Victorians used similar military metaphors and the language of conquest to describe their climbing.⁵⁸

Mountain conquest transferred prestige from the mountain to the climber. After five Swiss guides led eight English climbers to the summit of the Lyskamm, J. F. Hardy, a Cambridge don, reported that they doffed their hats and heartily sang *God Save the Queen*: “The noble old anthem fills our English hearts with happy thoughts of home and fatherland, and of the bright eyes that will sparkle, and the warm hearts that will rejoice at our success.” After their ascent, other climbers who had aspired to climb the Lyskamm scrambled to change their plans. William Mathews, a Birmingham surveyor, walked over a new pass because the Lyskamm “looked far less interesting now that its prestige was gone.” Edward North Buxton, a brewer, noted that “our hopes of the Lyskamm were blighted; but among the Monte Rosa group the Nord End was still untrodden by human feet, and we determined therefore to do our best to leave the marks of our boot nails on its summit.”⁵⁹

The same week these climbers competed to claim the Lyskamm, John Tyndall completed the first ascent of the Weisshorn. In his book *Mountaineering in 1861*, the physicist recalled what had motivated him to keep climbing. Both Tyndall and his guide, Johann-Josef Bennen, were suffering from fatigue. Refreshed by food and wine, Bennen looked at the mountain and exclaimed: “‘Herr! wir müssen ihn haben,’ and his voice, as he spoke, rung like steel within my heart. I thought of Englishmen in battle, of the qualities which had made them famous, it was mainly the quality of not knowing when to yield; of fighting for duty even after they had ceased to be animated by hope. Such thoughts had a dynamic value, and helped to lift me over the rocks.” Tyndall’s language echoes the lines of Tennyson’s romantic, restless Ulysses, which also became the motto of a later generation of

⁵⁷ Kennedy, ed., 2:88.

⁵⁸ Pace Robertson, “Mid-Victorians amongst the Alps” (n. 6 above), p. 133.

⁵⁹ Kennedy, ed., 1:392; 2:413, 403.

polar explorers: "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield." Tyndall's ascent concluded when "I pressed the very highest snowflake of the mountain, and the prestige of the Weisshorn was forever gone."⁶⁰

IV

By the mid-1860s the Matterhorn was the most prominent Alpine peak left unclimbed. "The mountain," wrote the barrister Vaughan Hawkins after attempting to climb the peak with Tyndall, "has a sort of prestige of invincibility which is not without its influence on the mind."⁶¹ The Matterhorn also attracted three Liverpool merchants, an engineer from Leeds, a young aristocrat, a student, a clergyman, and an engraver. But these British climbers did not have the mountain to themselves, as mountain climbing became a symbol of national virility across the rest of Europe as well. Jean-Antoine Carrel, a local stonemason and guide, made the first attempt to climb the Matterhorn in 1857. Carrel served in the *Bersaglieri* during the wars of Italian unification, and in the early 1860s he attempted to climb *il Cervino* in honor of his native valley and the Italian nation. In 1865, for example, Carrel led an expedition bankrolled by an engineer and grandee, Felice Giordano, who told the Italian minister of finance, "I shall go and plant our flag up there that it may be the first. This is essential."⁶²

Their most persistent British rival was Edward Whymper, an engraver from Lambeth, whose boyhood was saturated with dreams of adventure, discovery, and exploration. Whymper attended Albert Smith's Mont Blanc entertainment in 1858. He avidly read accounts of Arctic travel and found an account of the search for Franklin "exceedingly interesting as it describes a portion of Greenland which has never before been visited by any except the natives and by them but very rarely."⁶³ In 1860 Whymper went to the Dauphiné Alps in France to draw illustrations for William Longman, an Alpine Club member.

⁶⁰ John Tyndall, *Mountaineering in 1861* (London, 1862), p. 55; *Illustrated London News* 39 (September 7, 1861): 241. On the use of Tennyson at the South Pole, see Roland Huntford, *The Last Place on Earth* (New York, 1985), pp. 117, 522.

⁶¹ F. Vaughan Hawkins, "Partial Ascent of Mont Cervin (Matterhorn)," in *Vacation Tourists and Notes on Travel in 1860*, ed. Francis Galton (London, 1861), p. 289.

⁶² Felice Giordano to Quintino Sella, July 11, 1865; quoted in Guido Rey, *The Matterhorn*, trans. J. E. C. Eaton (London, 1907), p. 136.

⁶³ Edward Whymper, diary, March 18, 1857, and June 4, 1858; F. S. Smythe, *Edward Whymper* (London, 1940), pp. 36, 59. Whymper's diary also refers to his frequent attendance at cricket matches and Baptist chapel. He spent his formative years as an apprentice in his father's engraving firm, which provided the illustrations to many books of exploration, including Livingstone's *Missionary Travels*.

Wymper later claimed that he had first gone to the Alps “in the hope that I might acquire such a knowledge of snow and ice as might perhaps procure me a post upon some future English Arctic Expedition.”⁶⁴ In his contribution to *Peaks, Passes, and Glaciers*, Wymper argued that the Dauphiné offered a large area of unexplored and unclimbed peaks. “Some few travellers from time to time have endeavoured to draw attention towards [the Dauphiné], but it remains at the present hour not much better known than the interior of Africa.” The region was, Wymper continued, “a perfect mine, full of treasure, and offers a noble field of exploration for travellers—or tourists like myself, whose time and means will not permit them to indulge in more extensive rambles.”⁶⁵

After failed attempts on the Matterhorn over several years, Wymper pooled his resources with other British climbers and their guides, and they completed the first ascent of the Matterhorn on July 14, 1865. “The world was at our feet,” Wymper wrote of their arrival on top, “and the Matterhorn was conquered.”⁶⁶ Wymper tossed rocks toward the Italians to announce his success, while Michel Croz, a guide from Chamonix, tied his shirt to an alpenstock as an impromptu flag. On the descent, an inexperienced climber slipped and fell. Wymper and two Swiss guides survived because the rope tying them to the other climbers broke, plunging four climbers 4,000 feet to the glacier below.

News of the Matterhorn accident caused a sensation when it reached London, and reports on the tragedy reveal the continuing tensions between gentility, masculinity, and the language of conquest. The most famous attack on the climbers in *The Times* called the ascent “utterly incomprehensible,” and asked, “But is it life? Is it duty? Is it common sense? Is it allowable? Is it not wrong?”⁶⁷ While critics and defenders of climbing drew on a variety of discourses concerning risk and religion, masculinity and morality, what is most striking about the debate is the extent to which the language of exploration and empire enabled mountaineers to defend their sport with their patriotism. Charles Dickens recognized and criticized precisely this argument in two articles in *All the Year Round*. The accident, he said, was the

⁶⁴ *Alpine Journal* 6 (1873): 161.

⁶⁵ Kennedy, ed. (n. 54 above), 2:224.

⁶⁶ Edward Wymper, *Scrambles Amongst the Alps in the Years 1860–69* (London, 1871), p. 392. See also Gordon Stewart, “Wymper of the Matterhorn: A Victorian Tragedy,” *History Today* 33 (February 1983): 5–13; but for the broader context of the accident, see Hansen, “British Mountaineering” (n. 37 above), pp. 162–214.

⁶⁷ *The Times* (July 27, 1865).

result of foolhardiness: "Those who make capital of any kind of 'sport,' will gloss over these terrible deaths as inevitable visitations of Providence, and whine a remonstrance of a few catch words. The salubrious excitement of mountaineering for over-worked men; the proud pre-eminence of England in manly courage. We know the tune by heart." Dickens allowed that mountaineering could be enjoyed "in moderation and with common sense" in areas of relative safety. But the only motive he could discover for climbing the highest and most perilous peaks was "BRAG." And was climbing masculine or gentlemanly? "We shall be told that 'mountaineering' is a manly exercise. It is so, inasmuch as it is not womanly. But it is not noblemanly when it is selfish."⁶⁸

In contrast, defenders of mountaineering pointed to England's contemporary prosperity and power as the motivation for climbing and as the source of its physical and moral benefits. The *Pall Mall Gazette* attributed the growth of mountaineering to social conditions in England: "An exciting and laborious amusement is a precious thing in these days, when our own islands have been turned into a hive for the manufacture of wealth, and for the enjoyment of the small minority who have got good slices of it." Anthony Trollope averred that climbing strengthened the nation since it "makes our men active, courageous, ready in resource, prone to friendship, keen after gratifications which are in themselves good and noble." The *Illustrated London News* added that climbing mountains when no one asked them to do so had trained Englishmen to follow the call of duty and contributed to national military prowess, commercial prosperity, and scientific knowledge. "There would be small philosophy—nay, small knowledge of the world shown in discouraging adventure. It has given us the empire."⁶⁹

Mountaineers themselves also employed the language of empire to justify their climbing. Comparisons with other sports were common. According to the Oxford don H. B. George, the motive underlying all field sports was more visible in the impulse to climb mountains: "It is in part ambition translated into physical action." "The climbing spirit, like the love of all kindred pursuits, is essentially a form of that restless energy, that love of action for its own sake, of exploring the earth and subduing it, which has made England the great colonizer of the world,

⁶⁸ [Charles Dickens], "Hardihood and Foolhardihood," *All the Year Round* 14 (August 19, 1865): 86, and "Foreign Climbs," *All the Year Round* 14 (September 2, 1865): 137. Edward Whymper's annotation: "The second article was the reply that Charles Dickens made to the note I wrote to him." Scott Polar Research Institute, Cambridge, MS 822/35.

⁶⁹ "Athletic Amusements," *Pall Mall Gazette* 1 (August 5, 1865): 1–2; Anthony Trollope, "The Alpine Club Man," in *Travelling Sketches* (London, 1866), pp. 89–90; reprinted from *Pall Mall Gazette* 2 (September 2, 1865): 4; *Illustrated London News* 47 (July 29, 1865): 82.

and has led individual Englishmen to penetrate the wildest recesses of every continent.”⁷⁰ George also identified the essentially masculine “pleasure and profit” of Alpine climbing. “It brings the body into the best and healthiest condition” by exercising “muscles vigorously and successfully.” Moreover, “it unfolds to the eye an ever new series of beauties,” and “it feeds the intellect and imagination with the sight of the mightiest forces of nature in operation.” To these “physical and mental pleasures,” George added “the moral satisfaction which is derived from dangers braved and difficulties overcome.”⁷¹

The connections between danger and manliness allowed the mountaineers to overcome earlier accusations of aesthetic shallowness. The Matterhorn accident even prompted John Ruskin to revise his opinion of mountaineering. An early critic of Albert Smith, Ruskin still scoffed at the climbers in 1864: “The Alps themselves, which your own poets used to love so reverently, you look upon as soaped poles in a bear-garden, which you set yourselves to climb and slide down again, with ‘shrieks of delight.’” But soon after the accident, Ruskin argued that climbing was important to the development of manliness. “No blame ought to attach to the Alpine tourist for incurring danger,” Ruskin wrote. “Some experience of distinct peril, and the acquirements of quick and calm action in its presence, are necessary elements at some period of life, in the formation of manly character.”⁷² Although he never became a climber, Ruskin was elected to the Alpine Club in 1869 on the strength of his writing about the Alps.

These cultural associations were not confined to a domestic audience. British mountaineering and exploration in general, and the ascent of the Matterhorn in particular, continued to represent this vision of the British national character to audiences overseas. After the Matterhorn accident, an English correspondent to the *Journal de Genève* offered the following explanation for the popularity of mountain climbing among his compatriots.

In our era, so calm and bourgeois, in which happily war no longer serves to nourish and exercise courage and audacity, it is good that there are enterprises requiring the deployment of these qualities. They maintain these traditions of individual valour, of physical and moral strength, and of perseverance in the face of difficulties which have made England what

⁷⁰ Hereford Brooke George, *The Oberland and its Glaciers: Explored and Illustrated with Ice Axe and Camera* (London, 1866), p. 196–97.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

⁷² Cook and Wedderburn, ed. (n. 30 above), 18:21, 89–90. Ruskin delivered his criticisms as a lecture in 1864, published them in *Sesame and Lilies* in June 1865, and revised them by October 1865.

she is and without which she would soon decline. We are not a nation of shopkeepers, as we have been accused on the other side of the channel, and we do not desire to become one. On the contrary, in the midst of the material prosperity that surrounds us, we feel the necessity of not letting the heroic side of our national character disappear. It is not grand acts of courage and *endurance*, so to speak, which make every English heart flutter, but the ascent of difficult mountains, or the discovery of the sources of the Nile, or the exploration of Australia, where so many gallant men have fallen, and recently three more young men, until then unknown, but whose names will now live forever. These catastrophes, in demonstrating clearly the danger, have only increased these sentiments.⁷³

In 1871, *The Times* recommended Edward Whymper's account of the ascent of the Matterhorn, *Scrambles Amongst the Alps*, as "a book that should give a Hindoo born and bred in the rice swamps of the Ganges some distinct impression of ice-slopes and precipices, mountains and mountaineering."⁷⁴ If adventure and exploration initially served to legitimize Alpine climbing, these roles were soon reversed. Despite reservations expressed by some observers after the accident, the lasting legacy of the ascent of the Matterhorn was to foster assent to Britain's imperial mission.

V

Both the particular circumstances that popularized mountaineering and its broader significance to British culture were contingent results of the construction of mid-Victorian middle-class and imperial cultures. In the cultural space created by Albert Smith's show, the men of the Alpine Club combined contemporary definitions of gentility and masculinity with the imagined imperial geography of the Victorian middle classes.⁷⁵ Mountain climbing helped to legitimize exploration and the broader imperial expansion by transforming imperialism from an abstraction into something tangible and readily accessible to ambitious professional men. Scholars of imperial literature have suggested that adventure stories became "the energizing myth of imperialism," inspiring Englishmen "to go out into the world and explore, conquer, and rule."⁷⁶ What distinguished mountaineering from the literary genre

⁷³ *Journal de Genève* (August 19, 1865).

⁷⁴ *The Times* (August 24, 1871).

⁷⁵ See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London, 1983); and Felix Driver, "Geography's Empire: Histories of Geographical Knowledge," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 10 (1992): 23–40.

⁷⁶ Martin Green, *Dreams of Adventure, Deeds of Empire* (New York, 1979), p. 3.

of adventure, however, was its active, participatory character. Not everyone could travel to remote corners of the globe, but middle-class men with a few weeks' holiday could reach Switzerland and act out the drama of the empire in the Alps. In this manner, the British conquest of the natural world came to symbolize British imperial domination of other territory during the nineteenth century.⁷⁷

The representation of the mountaineer as exemplar of British masculinity was invented by middle-class climbers themselves. Although this was neither imposed from above nor learned in school, it did not come out of a vacuum. Anxieties about Britain's relative decline were especially prominent in converting this cult into a cultural imperative to construct a British masculinity that could compete with Napoleon III's France, Garibaldi's Italy, and Bismarck's Germany. Gentlemanly capitalists were as concerned about Britain's decline in the mid-Victorian years as they are sometimes supposed to have been only a generation later during the scramble for Africa. The financial clout of the gentlemanly capitalists should not obscure the cultural origins of the imperial ethos. The redefinition of gentility and the construction of middle-class leisure and culture raised again the question, How should British gentility and power, manliness and muscle, be represented when each appeared to be threatened? This problem was not confined to a narrowly defined "official mind" of imperialism any more than public interest in mountaineering was limited to the members of the Alpine Club.⁷⁸ Ascents from Mont Blanc to the Matterhorn attracted such attention in British culture because the view that they represented national virility and power was so widely shared. Indeed, the acceptance of a popular imperial culture in the later nineteenth century did not occur *de novo*; it was built on the invention of cultural practices such as mountaineering in the mid-Victorian decades.

Yet in some ways the Matterhorn accident did mark a break with the past—the end of the "Golden Age" of mountaineering. In 1868, Leslie Stephen wrote that "the conquest of the Matterhorn substantially concluded one era in mountain-climbing." Since all of the major Alpine peaks had been climbed, "the pleasure of discovery in the Alps will be reckoned amongst extinct amusements." "When there is a

⁷⁷ See John M. Mackenzie, ed., *Imperialism and the Natural World* (Manchester, 1990); John M. Mackenzie, *The Empire of Nature: Hunting Conservation and British Imperialism* (Manchester, 1988); and Harriet Ritvo, *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge, Mass., 1987).

⁷⁸ Compare the emphasis on the anxieties of the "official mind" in the face of international competition in Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians* (London, 1962), with the dynamic of gentlemanly capitalism in Cain and Hopkins (n. 12 above).

railroad to Timbuctoo, and another through the central regions of Asia, our great-great-grandchildren will feel on a large scale the same regret for the old days, when the earth contained an apparently inexhaustible expanse of unknown regions, that the Alpine traveller now feels on a very diminutive scale.” But Stephen predicted that “travelling will not cease,” even though “the glories of Columbus or of Livingstone will be no longer amongst the possible objects of ambition.” Twenty years later, C. D. Cunningham recast the history of mid-Victorian mountaineering in new, sanitized terms: “This period has been called ‘the great age of conquest’ in the Alps, and it also may well be termed the ‘golden age’ in the history of mountaineering.”⁷⁹

Mountaineering remained popular well after the mid-Victorian years, and British climbers carried these associations well beyond the Alps. “The real effect of the accident itself,” the *Saturday Review* wrote barely two months after the ascent of the Matterhorn, “has been to stimulate enterprise, and to crowd Zermatt to overflowing.” The *Athenaeum* also wondered if the members of the Alpine Club, “having overrun and overcome the Alps of Savoy and Switzerland, began to sigh for other Alps to conquer, as Alexander the Great sighed for other worlds to conquer.”⁸⁰ During the rest of the nineteenth century, British climbers clambered up peaks outside of Europe, from the Andes to the Himalayas, from Norway to New Zealand. This practice continued from the “Golden Age” of mountaineering in the Alps to the first ascent of Everest in 1953. After the “conquest” of Everest was reported on the day of Queen Elizabeth II’s coronation, Mount Everest briefly became identified with Buckingham Palace as Mont Blanc once had been with Piccadilly.

⁷⁹ [Leslie Stephen], “Alpine Climbing,” in *British Sports and Pastimes*, ed. Anthony Trollope (London, 1868), pp. 274–75; Cunningham and Abney, *Pioneers of the Alps* (n. 3 above), p. 14.

⁸⁰ “The Alpine Season,” *Saturday Review* 20 (September 23, 1865): 389; *Athenaeum* 44 (February 4, 1865), p. 157.