Meanings of Modernity

Britain from the Late-Victorian Era to World War II

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Martin Daunton and Bernhard Rieger

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Modern Mountains: The Performative Consciousness of Modernity in Britain, 1870–1940[1]

Peter H. Hansen

'Antiquity meets modernity.' Thus reads the *Daily Chronicle*'s caption of a photograph of three Tibetan Buddhist monks standing before a radio microphone in London. The monks were visiting the metropolis in a troupe of 'dancing lamas' who performed before the screening of *The Epic of Everest*, the film of the 1924 Mount Everest expedition. The caption renders the microphone as modernity and the monks as incongruous artefacts of antiquity. Likewise, the *Leeds Mercury* labelled this image 'White Man's Magic'. The *Liverpool Post*, however, gave the scene the less pejorative label, 'Native Music'.[2] Indeed, the scene may be interpreted otherwise, in ways that do not fix the monks in an Orientalist gaze or represent them as befuddled by modern technology. One might ask, for example, what the monks themselves thought of the microphone. While what they made of it remains unclear, what they made with it may still be heard on sound recordings from similar events. A phonograph record made by the same monks in Germany, for example, preserves for posterity the euphonious tones of their Buddhist chants. From this evidence, the monks appear to have interpreted radio and sound recordings – as they also interpreted film – not as white magic or the technology of an inscrutable modernity, but as a new medium for the transmission of their own missionary message to all sentient beings.[3]

Yet the caption's binary opposition of modernity and antiquity has implications for understanding the British consciousness of modernity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that need to be further explored. Jose Harris has suggested the 'unique dominance of the present time' in Britain in this period, and some of the fluid meanings of what it meant to be 'modern'.[4] Such newspaper headlines, which mixed metaphors of race and religion, time and the other, represented the monks in opposition to the British in familiar ways. 'Antiquity meets modernity' placed the monks in a primitive and primeval 'space-time' that, as Johannes Fabian has noted, established a temporal distance with the monks and denied their 'co-evalness'.[5] In phrases such as 'White Man's Magic', Edward

Said and other scholars have discerned discursive strategies for 'dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient'.[6] Moreover, scholars of British history have for some time examined the ways in which British identities have been constituted in relation to a variety of 'others'.[7] In some less sophisticated works of this kind, however, there is a tendency to restrict the boundaries of Britain too rigidly, and to define identities in a process that is too oppositional.[8] A more fruitful approach considers the boundaries of Britain as porous and diasporic, extending well beyond the British Isles, and the process of constructing identities as reciprocal. As Paul Gilroy has argued, this 'inside/outside relationship should be recognised as a more powerful, more complex, and more contested element in the historical, social, and cultural memory' of British 'modernity' than is often recognized.[9]

The British consciousness of modernity was sometimes defined in contrast to 'others' who, like the dancing lamas, were considered non-modern, ancient, backward, primitive, traditional or superstitious. While there were many ways of being 'modern,' one of the particular ways the British expressed their modernity was through mountaineering. British mountaineers defined themselves as 'modern' in relation to the peasants with whom they climbed as well as the urban, industrial society that they were escaping. Similar movements have been described by Jackson Lears and others as 'anti-modern'.[10] But mountaineering was not so much 'anti-modern' as emblematic of the multiplicity of modernity, containing within it a range of meanings that do not fall easily on to a dichotomous modern/anti-modern axis. Indeed, the practices of mountaineering suggest the limitations of the Weberian view of modernity as the triumph of instrumental rationality, secularization, disenchantment, and so forth. As Anthony Appiah rightly suggests, 'to understand our – our human – modernity we must first understand why the rationalization of the world can no longer be seen as the tendency either of the West or of history; why, simply put, the modernist characterization of modernity needs to be challenged'.[11]

In this regard, it may be useful to consider the British 'consciousness of modernity' as performative. While this term could suggest several avenues of inquiry, from the theatrical practices of public performances to speech acts that 'do things with words', I would like to explore the ways in which British modernity was performed through mountaineering. To be 'modern' is not something that can be established once and for all; it has to be continually demonstrated and performed. Mountaineers may have been escaping one kind of modernity in Britain, but they intended to demonstrate their distinctive modernity through climbing mountains. By understanding mountaineering as performative, I want to suggest not merely that it was the expression of some underlying condition – of modernity or anti-modernism – but that the languages, gestures, and symbols of mountaineering actually constituted the 'modernity' they were said to describe.[12] Such an approach

may clear the space in which to locate the agency of the 'others' on whom these images of modernity were dependent, and whose presence rendered these images themselves ambivalent. Indeed, the more profound ambivalence of this particular form of modernity stemmed from mountaineering's combination of the 'traditional' veneration of mountains with the more 'modern' impulse to conquer them.

When Leslie Stephen brought Melchior Anderegg, his Swiss guide, to London by train, the man of letters remarked that the view of the London suburbs from their railway carriage 'is not so fine a view as we have seen together from the top of Mont Blanc'. Melchior Anderegg replied, 'Ah sir, it is far finer.' Stephen, who considered the scene a 'dreary expanse of chimney-pots' on the edge of 'this dingy metropolis,' was shocked at the discrepancy between his views and those of his guide.[13] He later used this exchange to begin his discussion of the change in attitudes towards mountains since the eighteenth century in *The Playground of Europe* (1871). Stephen noted that in previous centuries, many people who lived in or visited the Alps feared that devils, dragons, elves, fairies, goblins or gnomes haunted the mountains. 'These picturesque beings', Stephen wrote, 'disappeared before the early dawn of science, much as the natives of Tasmania have disappeared before the English immigrants.'[14]

Before the mid-1850s, Switzerland was still visited rarely and the Alps were almost never climbed. Within a decade, however, Albert Smith's West End performances about his ascent of Mont Blanc popularized mountain climbing among the British middle classes. By adopting the discourse of discovery from explorers in the rest of the world, the members of the Alpine Club represented the Alps as a *terra incognita* to be explored and conquered.[15] When these climbers visited the Alps, they considered the local population to be primitive peasants or superstitious seigneurs who would rather live at the foot of a mountain than plant their feet on its summit. By systematically climbing the Alps, Stephen and other British mountaineers represented themselves as agents of a progressive modernity, in which their imperial masculinity conquered the space that indigenous superstition had left undisturbed for centuries. When they extended their reach into other parts of the world, these mountaineers took these sentiments with them. In the mid-1930s, for example, General C. G. Bruce wrote: 'For the Himalayas at the present time, as far as its indigenous inhabitants are concerned, are far and away behind what a Swiss or a Northern Italian population was like 200 years ago, and further, the scale of life, clothing, food, etc., still remains far beneath European standards.'[16]

The backwardness of the Alps or the Himalayas or other ranges appealed to British tourists and climbers for yet another reason. They wanted to escape from contemporary British society. Leslie Stephen, for example, was attracted to mountains as a refuge from modernity: 'Mountain scenery is the antithesis not so much of the plains as of the commonplace. Its charm lies in its vigorous originality;

and if political philosophers speak the truth, which I admit to be an exceedingly doubtful proposition, the danger of modern times consists in our loss of that quality.'[17] Stephen noted that people in Britain wore the same clothes, read the same papers, 'talk the same twaddle', and submit to the same conventions of propriety and respectability. The Alps remained 'places of refuge where we may escape from ourselves and from our neighbours'.[18] Paradoxically, British mountaineers were escaping themselves to become themselves, escaping one form of modernity in Britain in order to represent or perform another modernity in Switzerland. Mountaineering was not 'anti-modern', but represented an ambivalent modernity that combined mountain conquest with mountain worship.

Mountain conquest was often expressed in the search for first ascents. The so-called 'golden age' of mountaineering in the 1850s and 1860s had witnessed the first ascent of nearly all the major peaks of the Alps. Once these feats had been achieved, however, climbers did not put themselves out to pasture. Instead, they developed novel ways to demonstrate their modernity. In the late nineteenth century, climbers sought to achieve first ascents of the *same* mountains in the Alps in winter, or without guides, or by a woman, or by many new routes. This last variation, especially, seemed to create a vast array of possibilities. Each innovation elicited at least mild derision from the old guard, who had assumed that mountaineering was synonymous with the 'exploration' of new ground. In 1878, for example, Clinton Dent bemoaned the 'ascents of old mountains from "new sides" – to use a thoroughly Alpine phrase, for which I am almost tempted to substitute "wrong sides"'. Within a decade, 'guideless' climbing was so well developed that by 1886 Dent had to acknowledge its validity.[19] Dent himself climbed with guides in the Caucasus, and other climbers went to the Himalayas as well as the Andes, Africa, Canada, Norway, and New Zealand. Once again, inasmuch as these peaks had not been climbed by the people who lived among them, these British ascents were seen by the climbers as evidence of the modernity of those men who could summon the nerve to climb them.

Alongside mountain conquest, another dimension of the ambivalent modernity of mountaineering derived from what might be called, for lack of a better term, mountain worship. While there were precedents for veneration and awe of nature in Britain and elsewhere, it is not easy to assign mountaineers to one 'tradition' or the other. For example, some of the later Alpine writings of Leslie Stephen, a noted agnostic, were more mystical in their appreciation of mountains than his earlier works.[20] While his attitudes have sometimes been interpreted as 'Wordsworthian', it may be equally plausible to see them as 'Melchior-Andereggian'. Stephen and the other climbers who spent long periods with guides in the Alps appear to have engaged in a mutual mimesis with their guides. Such exchange became somewhat less common in the Alps in later generations, as contact between guides and climbers became more formal and distant.[21] From the late nineteenth

century onwards, many climbers travelled outside Europe to recover the experience that earlier climbers had enjoyed with 'primitive' peasants in the Alps.

The particular modernity represented by mountaineering frequently combined mountain conquest and mountain worship in some degree. Consider the writings of the Revd Walter Weston, an Anglican missionary in Japan, a country with a venerable 'tradition' of mountain worship. Weston began climbing in Japan while serving as a missionary in Kobe and Yokohama for extended periods between 1888 and 1915. While nearly all the mountains he climbed had already been ascended, often innumerable times over hundreds of years by Japanese as the destination for local pilgrimages, he did make many first ascents by a foreigner. Beginning in the 1890s, Weston wrote frequently about his ascents and was fascinated by the Japanese mountain cults.[22] The 'modernizing' Japan of the Meiji restoration, however, is absent from his account. In the *Playground of the Far East* (1918), Weston reassured the 'traveller bound for Japan in search of the primitive and the picturesque' that these were 'combined to a degree unknown in any other country'. They could be found two days' journey from Tokyo in 'lonely valleys whose old-world ways, quaint superstitions, and primitive institutions' suggested 'a leap backward from the twentieth century to the tenth.'[23]

Weston's only mountain conquest that was his alone was the first ascent of Ho-wo-zan. Even Kôbô Daishi, a renowned figure who had climbed many of the highest Japanese peaks a hundred years earlier, had failed to climb it. Weston was joined by three local hunters, two of whom quickly deserted him to hunt a large chamois. The third hunter continued with him, but stopped 150 feet below the summit, where Weston managed, by heaving a rope up a steep ledge, to pull himself alone up the final ridge. 'I found myself standing, for the first time in my life, on a hitherto untrodden, though famous peak, the top of Ho-wo-zan.'[24] On their descent, they met the hunters carrying their massive chamois, which they ceremoniously cut open, offering to Weston its raw liver, in honour of his ascent, so that he could partake of the chamois' agility, strength, and speed. Several days later, another guide proposed that Weston erect at the foot of the mountain a shrine in honour of the summit deity, and that Weston become the first *Kannushi*, or guardian priest, of the mountain god.[25] He declined both the liver and patronage of a shrine, though after his retirement he referred to the post of *Kannushi* as the highest preferment ever offered in his ecclesiastical career.

Each of these incidents reinforced the ambiguous 'modernity' that Weston found in Japan. In language that suggests the central theme of his books, he wrote that on one occasion he 'fell to meditating upon the strange contrasts suggested by this combination of the ancient and the modern – the science of today side by side with the quaint nature-worship of a thousand years of yesterday' symbolized by a surveyor's stone and the ruins of a shrine.[26] On other occasions, he made this same contrast using meteorological instruments and shrines where peasants prayed

for rain. At the summit of Fuji, he observed next to weather-forecasting instruments 'some white-robed pilgrim take his stand to pay his devotions to the rising sun before he goes off to the post office, recently erected a few yards away, to dispatch to some 40 friends in far-off provinces the latest forms of picture postcards in which a licensed vendor on the summit drives a "roaring trade"!' Although he notes that these scenes took place 'without apparent objection or incongruity in native eyes', in Weston's account they are crucial in performing his awareness of his own modernity.[27] In other words, just as the presence of the pilgrims affirmed the modernity of the meteorology, so too the mountain cults were necessary to demonstrate Weston's own sense of being modern, even as he shared their sense of wonder in the mountains. At his death in 1940, Weston became known in British mountaineering circles as the 'father of Japanese mountaineering'.

Given the very long tradition of mountain worship in Japan, this claim would sound even more hyperbolic and absurd than it does if it did not fit a wider pattern. Similar claims were made for William Cecil Slingsby, whose climbs in Norway beginning in the 1870s led other British mountaineers to consider him the 'father of Norwegian mountaineering'. The title of Slingsby's book, *Norway, the Northern Playground* (1904), also had a familiar ring. In addition, by the turn of the century British alpinists retrospectively claimed Alfred Wills's ascent of the Wetterhorn in 1854 as inaugurating the 'golden age' of mountaineering in the Alps.[28] Each of these foundation myths was a performative representation of British modernity. The claims for alpine paternity suggested that indigenous populations had learned to climb from the British; whereas local guides had almost invariably showed them the way. Moreover, the phrase 'the playground of_____' depopulated the landscape and redefined the complex societies that they had invaded for their pleasure into mere 'playgrounds'.

While the mountains of Japan and Norway never became 'British' playgrounds, some parts of the Alps apparently did, and the rapid development of the Alps changed the ways in which mountaineers could demonstrate their modernity among them. In 1879, over one million tourists visited Switzerland, with British tourists accounting for more than a quarter of the total and almost one-third of all tourist expenditures.[29] So many British climbers and tourists came to the Alps that many parts of Switzerland briefly became British enclaves if not British colonies. In 1886, James Bryce reported to a friend in America that 'Switzerland has become quite English – at least in these health resorts. One changes the scenery but not the conversation, so there is little mental refreshment. When you come over it will be nice to tell you to which places to go to get real foreign life and natural beauty combined – they are few and growing fewer.'[30] The throngs of British tourists created a range of services, ranging from hotels to English churches. Dorothy Pilley Richards recalled that the Swiss resort was still very 'English' in the 1920s. 'There too, the English Church and the four-square hotels, institutional, dominant,

already mature instruments of an invasion. New visitors now will find it hard to imagine how "English" they could be . . . Entering one of them, you felt you were joining something. You realized it most of all when you sat down in your appointed place at the long table. Ritual had you in its velvet paw.'[31] In this environment, it became even more difficult to escape the conventions of British society in Switzerland, at least in the way that earlier British mountaineers had done.

The very 'Englishness' of the Alps has implications for the British consciousness of modernity. Peter Mandler has rightly argued that the nostalgic vision of rural 'Englishness' was neither as dominant nor as 'anti-modern' as has often been supposed. Rural nostalgia was less well developed in Britain than elsewhere in Europe by the early twentieth century.[32] It should be emphasized that these two conditions were related. Put another way, this kind of rural nostalgia was not well developed in Britain *because* it was well developed elsewhere in Europe. Mandler astutely notes that there is no equivalent in Britain to the *Heimatschutz* movement. In much of German-speaking Europe, the *Heimatschutz* movement advocated the preservation of the countryside and of the peasantry in a nostalgic vision of 'homeland'.[33] Britain developed no equivalent to the *Heimatschutz* movement because that movement itself extended into Britain. British mountaineers founded the English branch of the *Schweizerische Vereinigung für Heimatschutz*, or in francophone Switzerland, *Ligue pour la Conservation de la Suisse Pittoresque*, in 1905, barely a year after the organization took root in Switzerland. The British professional classes that vacationed in Europe idealized the peasantry, but not a 'British' peasantry, since the peasantry by then had all but disappeared in Britain. The English branch attracted strong support in the press before the First World War, much of it in response to proposals to build a railway to the summit of the Matterhorn.[34]

The English branch of the Swiss *Heimatschutz* is indicative of the extent to which the British consciousness of modernity was often defined in relation to people and places outside Britain, whether in Europe, the empire, or elsewhere. Many developments that in other countries would have taken place domestically were thus imported/exported by the British. Characteristically, when Henry Lunn, a Nonconformist travel agent, organized an oecumenical conference on the model of the American Chautauqua movement, he held the event not in Britain but in Grindelwald, Switzerland. As a travel agent, Lunn was able to mix business and pleasure, turning the prophets into profits. He made the travel arrangements to Grindelwald and organized excursions for the *conférenciers* to Mont Blanc, the Matterhorn, the St Gotthard pass, the Italian lakes, the Engadine, and the falls of the Rhine.[35] Lunn also led the development of winter sports in the Alps. In 1902, he organized winter tours exclusively for Eton and Harrow old boys. After expanding eligibility to wider range of schools, Lunn formed the Public Schools Alpine Sports Club in 1905. By the winter of 1906, the Club had 5,000 clients,

completely occupying thirty hotels, which temporarily became English colonies.[36] William Martin Conway admired their efforts as 'through the agency of the club the members formed part of an assemblage which seemed to produce the old kind of comradeship which formerly existed in Switzerland'.[37]

If the Alps were the most popular destination for British climbers before 1914, during the period between the wars a few climbers looked upward to the Himalayas while many more turned inward to Britain for places to demonstrate their modernity. After the war, returning servicemen yearned for forms of domesticity removed from military models.[38] Alison Light has also identified a 'conservative modernity' between the wars that moved away from a masculine rhetoric of heroism and national destiny 'to an Englishness at once less imperial and more inward looking, more domestic and more private'.[39] One sign of these trends was the increasing popularity of outdoor recreations in Britain, including rambling, hosteling, scouting, orienteering, and climbing. These activities drew on traditions of liberal middle-class culture, working-class respectability, rational recreations, self-improvement and natural history in new ways that appealed to men and, significantly, to women, from a variety of social groups.[40] Several factors pushed and pulled in this direction. Outdoor recreations in the English landscape became important ways for men and women to assert their citizenship and modernity through the 'arts of right living'.[41] In Britain, such activities were readily accessible and easily affordable. By contrast, the cost of a Swiss holiday rose after the war (after falling throughout the nineteenth century), and the 1931 devaluation of the pound put the price even further out of reach for many people in Britain.[42]

In their place, alpine climbers from Germany, Austria, and Italy thought themselves the most up-to-date and 'modern' mountaineers between the wars. After the German and Austrian Alpine Clubs effected their own *Anschluss* in 1924, they moved from advocating the anti-cog-railway and anti-tourist positions that had been common before 1914 to anti-Semitism and later National Socialism.[43] The British mountaineers who had joined them in opposing mountain railways with the Swiss *Heimatschutz* did not follow the same political trajectory. The 'Bavarian school' of German and Austrian climbers risked their lives and achieved nationalist acclaim by using pitons and other mechanical aids to make first ascents of treacherous north faces. British climbers considered the nationalism unseemly, the methods unsporting and the north faces simply too dangerous. Indeed, fanatical fascists soon replaced alpine peasants as the British 'other' in the Alps in the 1930s.

Yet British mountaineers recognized in the practices of German climbing enough of their own 'modernity' to make them uncomfortable.[44] In a philippic on 'the perversion of mountaineering', C. F. Meade defined British mountaineering in opposition to the foolhardy risk-taking, nationalism and 'modern spirit of competition' that classified mountaineering as a sport. Meade conceded that by

excluding foreigners from the Everest expeditions, Britain was not entirely free from nationalist chauvinism. He also ridiculed British advocates of 'safety first' in climbing and, writing in the conservative *Quarterly Review* in 1936, in politics as well. Meade believed that mountaineering blended 'a longing for adventure, a love of nature and a sentiment that can only be called mystical'. Yet he did not oppose mountain worship to mountain conquest so much as advocate the position that climbers had to love nature to conquer it: 'The mountaineer is matching himself against the forces of nature, not vying with other men.'[45]

This combination of modernity and mysticism was also evident in the British Everest expeditions. Since the 1850s, the Survey of India had mapped and named the world's highest peaks and British hill stations had colonized parts of the Himalayas as British resorts; and Lord Curzon, as Viceroy, proposed the ascent of Everest in order to represent British authority on the boundaries of India.[46] In 1921 Francis Younghusband, an explorer and mystic and then President of the Royal Geographical Society, launched the first Everest expedition to advance scientific knowledge, to elevate the 'human spirit' and to inspire man's conquest of nature. Once the Everest expeditions reached the mountain, however, they encountered the Tibetan Buddhist worship of Everest as a sacred place, and began to describe their own ascent as a 'pilgrimage'.[47] The traditions of British mysticism and religion also influenced how they interpreted Everest. The disappearance of George Mallory and Andrew Irvine on Everest in 1924, for example, briefly revived cults ranging from chivalry and the Christian gentleman, to psychical research and spiritualist seances with Mallory's ghost.

Many British observers argued that Mallory and the other Everest climbers embodied the 'spirit of man' against the material forces of nature. This language was redolent with previous associations from the 'spirit of adventure' of nineteenth-century imperial explorers and the 'spirit of man' that had fortified British morale during the war against Germany. On the one hand, the 'spirit of man' could inspire an emphasis on spirituality and humanism. On Everest, for example, George Mallory had read to other climbers extracts from *The Spirit of Man* (1916), Robert Bridges' wartime anthology of uplifting verse. On the other hand, such rhetoric could shroud the brutality of the very colonial conquest that it justified. Younghusband, who popularized the view of Everest as an epochal struggle between man and nature, considered the Tibetans and Sherpas deficient in 'spirit' and thus as much to be conquered as the rest of the mountain: 'The faint-hearted peoples around [Everest] fear to approach it. They have the capacity of body to reach the summit any year they liked. But they are lacking in spirit.'[48] While Younghusband generously praised the porters, he believed that the British supplied the 'spirit' – the modernity – of the Everest expeditions, just as they had elsewhere in the empire. As David Matless has suggested, Younghusband's emphasis on spirituality, and his imperialism allied with hints of fascism, should be understood

as central to the modernity of geography (and, we should add, mountaineering), not as an escape from it.[49]

In the 1930s, similar large-scale, quasi-military expeditions to Everest, Kangchenjunga, and Nanga Parbat met with frustration, futility, and fatalities. On Nanga Parbat, many German climbers and Sherpa porters died on expeditions that were actively promoted by the Nazi government. Partly in reaction to these deaths, and partly in reaction to the imperial excesses of their own Everest expeditions, some British mountaineers began to organize small expeditions to the Himalayas. In 1931, Frank Smythe's ascent of Kamet pioneered the more intimate, small-scale expeditions that Eric Shipton and H. W. Tilman used on expeditions to Nanda Devi and other peaks. This shift to smaller-scale expeditions in the Himalayas was similar to the increasing emphasis on domestic climbing in Britain between the wars. Each signalled novel ways to represent British 'modernity' in a less overtly imperial style. The climbers on the smaller expeditions experienced closer friendships with one another and with their Sherpa porters in ways that highlighted tensions between British attitudes towards mountain worship and mountain conquest.

The contrast between these two approaches – the small scale and large-scale expeditions – may be seen in two films from the early 1930s, *Kamet Conquered* and *Wings Over Everest*. By this period, even small-scale British expeditions to the Himalayas described themselves as performative of Britain's imperial power. *Kamet Conquered* (1932) opens with Frank Smythe, the narrator, recapitulating an imperial theme. He hoped to answer the question his audience must be wondering: 'Why do men do these things? Why are they prepared to undergo difficulties, hardships, even dangers just for the sake of climbing to the top of a mountain? The answer to that question is for adventure. The same spirit of adventure that carried our ancestors across uncharted oceans to new lands. The spirit of adventure upon which the very foundation of our empire rests.'[50] Although Smythe appealed to the spirit of 'ancestors,' climbing mountains to represent adventure had been a mid-Victorian invention. Moreover, even if the film proclaimed Kamet 'conquered', the conquest incorporated 'mystical' attitudes of mountain worship. For example, Smythe's film portrayed the climbers as pilgrims visiting a Hindu temple, and dwelt at length on a shot of the source of the Ganges gushing out of a glacier.

The conclusion of their conquest was also ambivalent. As they reach the summit of Kamet gasping for breath, the film concludes: 'We seized hold of our Sirdar, Lewa [a Sherpa], and shoved him on ahead of us, so that he should be the first on top. It was, I think, the least compliment we could pay to those splendid men, our porters, to whom we owed the whole success of our expedition.'[51] In his book, Smythe adds that when they pushed Lewa on top, 'I do not think that he quite understood what we were doing'; and Lewa almost certainly did not consider this

gesture a compliment. The scant evidence suggests he may have thought the British were using him to test the vengeance of the summit deities. Smythe recalled that none of the porters would climb a short distance to retrieve equipment jettisoned on the descent from the summit: 'Superstition was rife among them, and they would not stir . . . Nima Dorje had returned to camp in a hysterical condition and babbling of gods and devils whom [*sic*] he affirmed had taken all the air away. And now the all-powerful god of Kamet had burnt Lewa's feet.' Even though the film's opening narration had extolled the discourses of adventure and empire, its closing sequence includes striking images of Sherpas and Sahibs caressing each other's frostbitten feet. The climbers' conquest of Kamet is tempered by the Sherpas' worship of the mountain and by the reciprocal obligations they owe one another.

Wings Over Everest (1934) depicts the first aeroplane flight over Everest in 1933. As the repeated attempts to climb Everest met with failure, the British flight over the mountain served as its only 'conquest' until 1953. As two pilots look at the snow-capped Himalayas from the hills of Darjeeling, they resolve to look down from above on the mysteries of the mountains. The film then jumps to the dome of St Paul's in London, representing the mysteries of the 'west' to those of Everest in the 'east'. After the flight organizers and pilots, including the Marquis of Douglas and Clydesdale, express grave concern over their lack of funds, the scene shifts to the Scottish estate of Lady Houston, a right-wing millionaire, whom they ask to underwrite the expedition. As she listens to their sales pitch, Lady Houston sits nestled under bedcovers. She then says: 'What appears to me is that the people of India, if it is a success – and it's going to be a success – well, they'll know that we're not the decadents that their leaders try to make us out to be. That's what appeals to me. I agree. I'll help.' Cue the roar of British technology – engines, turbines, power plants, casting equipment and moulding machines. After the RAF assembles the Westland aeroplanes in Karachi, and after training flights in India, crowds of Indians watch them take off for Everest. Several bare-chested Indian peasants briefly look up from their harvest to watch the planes. After they fly over the summit and return safely to India, someone asks the crew 'Did you get there? What was it like?' One of the pilots replies 'All right.'[52]

Kamet Conquered and *Wings over Everest* differed in significant ways. The Everest flight was organized by aristocrats, powered by British technology, and, between take-off and landing, there was no contact between the pilots and the local population. On Kamet (and Everest), the British climbers were almost all middle-class in background and reluctant to use technological aids, including supplemental oxygen, and remained in close quarters for months on end with porters, guides and translators. This long period of association changed the way the climbers interpreted their ascents, incorporating elements of mountain worship alongside mountain conquest. At the summit of Kamet, Smythe gave what he

considered the honour of stepping first on the summit to Lewa, the head porter. Their ascent becomes a collaborative endeavour in Smythe's account, rather than merely a demonstration of their spirit of adventure. During the Everest flight, the fleeting glimpse of peasants toiling in the fields is the closest that Indians or Nepalis or Tibetans come to contact with the aeroplane or its pilots.

Both films represented British modernity in relation to the 'other', and the encounter between climbers and porters on Kamet makes clear the ambivalence inherent in both situations. While there is some evidence that Lewa did not consider stepping first on the summit an honour, there is precious little evidence to indicate what the film's Indian peasants thought of the Everest flight. Yet this very lacuna rendered Lady Houston's intentions ambivalent, since the flight almost certainly did not have the effects in India that she intended. Indeed, its impact in Britain is also uncertain. British mountaineers were embarrassed at the pilot's success where climbers had failed, and uncomfortable with the distinctly fascist overtones that accompanied Lady Houston's vocal support of right-wing causes, including Oswald Mosley's British fascists, as well as aviation. Although the contrast between politically motivated, large-scale British or German expeditions of conquest and the more intimate, small-scale expeditions that blended elements of mountain worship should not be overdrawn, the differences between them posed dilemmas for British mountaineers by the 1930s.

These dilemmas were widely recognized. W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood's play, *The Ascent of F 6* (1936–7), satirized the imperial context of mountaineering and portrayed the conquest of the mountain as an interior, psychological tragedy. In Auden and Isherwood's play, officials from the Foreign Office and the tabloid press propose the ascent of F 6, the highest mountain on the border between British Sudoland and Ostnian Sudoland, to quell a native insurrection. The natives of Sudoland believe the mountain haunted by a guardian demon and refuse to set foot on it. However, Ostnian agents have propagated the rumour that 'the white man who first reaches the summit of F 6 will be lord over *both* Sudolands, with his descendants, for a thousand years', and launched a secret expedition to climb F 6. The British turn to Michael Ransom, an introspective scholar based on Mallory and Lawrence of Arabia, to lead their expedition. Though eager to climb F 6, Ransom is repulsed by their political motives, and refuses to go until asked by his mother, whose approval he craves.

At a monastery on F 6, Ransom looks into a crystal ball and hears voices of the public calling him to inspire, lead and save them. The Abbot of the monastery warns Ransom against his desire to conquer the mountain demon and save mankind, and urges him to retire to a life of abnegation and contemplation. Ransom considers the offer, but passively accepts the messianic role when the climbers tell him the Ostnians are already hammering the south face full of pitons: 'Very well then, since you wish it. I obey you. The summit will be reached, the Ostnians defeated,

the Empire saved. And I have failed.' Ransom fails because he has been corrupted by power. As they ascend, the other climbers are each sacrificed to Ransom's tormented ambition. On reaching the top, he confronts the mountain demon, which appears to him in the shape of his mother, and collapses on the summit. The British public and government pay tribute to his glorious death.[53]

The particular consciousness of modernity represented by British mountaineering was defined and performed in relation to a variety of others, including Alpine peasants, Japanese pilgrims, German climbers, Buddhist lamas, and Hindu saddhus, and their fictional equivalents, the Abbot and the Ostnians on F 6. Sometimes British ascents conquered the superstitions of mountain worship as well as the 'material forces of nature' on the mountain, but on other occasions their modernity was constituted by their very incorporation of mountain worship with mountain conquest. Before 1914, British dominance was so generalized that these performances could take place in Switzerland or Norway or Japan as much as in the 'formal' empire. In areas outside British control, the political impact of the climbers' conquest of superstition was muted and implicit, though by no means absent. In the empire, the same ascents had an explicit political resonance that was celebrated by some (Francis Younghusband or Lady Houston) but ambivalently accommodated by others (Frank Smythe or Michael Ransom). Whether they liked it or not, the very modernity that mountaineers performed in their ascents could also be appropriated. In 1937, for example, the Japanese imperial government awarded Walter Weston the Order of the Sacred Treasure and erected a plaque in his honour in the Japanese Alps, co-opting his climbing as a sign of their own modernity. British attempts on Everest in the 1930s emphasized similar themes, which were revived in 1953 when news of the conquest of Everest was reported on the day of Queen Elizabeth II's coronation as a symbol of British modernity.[54]

The performative 'consciousness of modernity' in mountaineering forged by the 1930s continues to circulate at the end of the twentieth century. When C. G. Crawford gave a lecture on the ascent of Everest to the YMCA at the Stewart Hall, Norwich in November 1933 he appeared to make fun of the Tibetans. 'The Tibetan Government have refused us permission to try again, because they say we bring bad weather and spoil their crops. (Laughter.) They say the gods of the Himalayas are displeased with us, and send bad weather to overwhelm us. But we hope to try again in 1935, if we can get permission. (Applause.)'[55] Gordon Stewart recently cited this passage, and particularly the audience's laughter, to support the view that there was an unchallenged British master narrative of Everest and empire in the early twentieth century.[56] But such a conclusion is a form of imperial nostalgia, a yearning for the time when British narratives were apparently unchallenged and autonomous. Crawford's lecture incorporated within it the Tibetan point of view and thus acknowledged the counter-narrative that he was challenging. Moreover, if the Tibetans did not read the provincial British press, the mandarins of the India

Office did, and they reprimanded the Everest expedition for Crawford's comments. The India Office feared Crawford's remarks would reach the Tibetans (who did read the English papers), and that Tibet would again cancel the expeditions to Everest.[57] In consequence, the climbers were severely restrained from making any similar comments, and Crawford was excluded from future expeditions.

It is also worth reflecting further on the audience reaction to Crawford's lecture. For in their laughter is another performative consciousness of modernity. If one accepts the modernist characterization of modernity, it is easy to assume that Crawford's YMCA audience was laughing at the Tibetans. This is all too easy to assume. Amid the chortles of derision and sniggers of the louts, was there also a nervous laugh, or a chuckle of recognition? Did some members of the audience recognize in his Tibetan tales their own superstitions or the continuing presence of the divine and supernatural in their lives?[58] Their laughter should be located at the margins of the modern, a momentary manifestation of subaltern agency that was soon displaced by the patriotic applause. Perhaps this Norwich audience saw in the Everest expeditions in Tibet elements of both mountain worship and mountain conquest. Like the British climbers who went to the Alps or the Himalayas or other ranges, their reaction was not so much modern or anti-modern as negotiating the instability of 'modernity'. Some of the performances that mountaineers used to accommodate this ambivalence, such as the myths of themselves as the 'fathers' of mountaineering, have also proved to be as transitory as the laughter was ephemeral. Yet even this should not have surprised some of the climbers. As Walter Weston read on the wall of a Japanese inn, 'Though life, like the entrails of a sheep, be many thousands of miles long, yet fame is ever as short as the horns of a snail.'[59]

Notes

1 The author is grateful for comments from the editors and from audiences at the Australian National University and the Neale Colloquium at University College London.

2 See *Daily Chronicle*, *Leeds Mercury*, *Liverpool Post*, on 16 Dec. 1924, in a book of Everest newsclippings, EE 41(b), Royal Geographical Society Archives, London.

3 Peter H. Hansen, 'Der tibetische Horizont: Tibet im Kino des frühen 20. Jahrhunderts', in *Mythos Tibet: Wahrnehmungen, Projektionen, Phantasien*, ed. Thierry Dodin and Heinz Räther, (Cologne: Dumont Verlag, 1997), pp. 87–103.

4 Jose Harris, *Private Lives and Public Spirit: Britain, 1870–1914* (London: Penguin, 1993), pp. 32–6.

5 Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983). See also Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellect, Modern Lives* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1990).

6 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1979), p. 3. See also Peter H. Hansen, 'The Dancing Lamas of Everest: Cinema, Orientalism, and Anglo-Tibetan Relations in the 1920s', *American Historical Review* 101 (1996): 712–47.

7 See Linda Colley, 'Britishness and Otherness: an Argument', *Journal of British Studies* 31 (1992): 309–29.

8 Gordon Stewart, 'Tenzing's Two Wrist-Watches: The Conquest of Everest and Late Imperial Culture, 1921–1953', *Past and Present* 149 (1995): 170–97. See also Peter H. Hansen, 'Debate: Tenzing's Two Wrist-Watches: The Conquest of Everest and Late Imperial Culture, 1921–1953, Comment,' *Past and Present* 157 (1997): 159–78.

9 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and the Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), p. 11.

10 T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Anti-modernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920* (New York: Pantheon, 1981). See also Frank Trentmann, 'Civilization and its Discontents: English Neo-Romanticism and the Transformation of Anti-Modernism in Twentieth-Century Western Culture', *Journal of Contemporary History* 29 (1994): 583–625.

11 Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 144–5.

12 Compare Judith Butler's account of the performativity of gender: Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 141.

13 Leslie Stephen, *The Playground of Europe* (London: Longman, 1871), p. 1.

14 Stephen, *Playground*, pp. 17–20.

15 Peter H. Hansen, 'Albert Smith, the Alpine Club, and the Invention of Mountaineering in Mid-Victorian Britain', *Journal of British Studies* 34 (1995): 300–24.

16 C. G. Bruce, *Himalayan Wanderer* (London: Maclehose, 1934), p. 277.

17 Stephen, *Playground*, p. 66.

18 Stephen, *Playground*, p. 67.

19 C. T. Dent, 'Alpine Climbing – Past, Present, and Future', *Alpine Journal* 9 (1878): 65–72; and C. T. Dent, 'Amateur and Professional Guides of the Present Day', *Alpine Journal* 12 (1886): 289–300.

20 See Leslie Stephen, 'Sunset on Mont Blanc,' and 'The Alps in Winter,' in *Playground of Europe* (1894 and later editions).

21 Peter H. Hansen, 'Partners: Guides and Sherpas in the Alps and Himalayas, 1850s–1950s', in *Voyages and Visions: Towards a Cultural History of Travel*, ed. Jas Elsner and Joan-Pau Rubiés, (London: Reaktion, 1999), pp. 210–31.

22 See Walter Weston, 'Mountaineering and Mountain Superstitions in the Japanese Alps', *Alpine Journal* 17 (1894–5): 493–510, and Walter Weston, *Mountaineering and Exploration in the Japanese Alps* (London: Murray, 1896).

23 Walter Weston, *Playground of the Far East* (London: Murray, 1918).

24 Weston, *Playground*, p. 120. Weston, 'My Swiss and Japanese Mountaineering,' *Sangaku* 5 (1910): 13.

25 Weston, *Playground*, p. 123.

26 Weston, *Playground*, p. 114.

27 Weston, *Sangaku* (1910): 15–16; Weston, *Playground*, p. 64.

28 See C. D. Cunningham and W. de W. Abney, *Pioneers of the Alps* (London: Low, Marston, 1887).

29 Michael G. Mullhall, *Mullhall's Dictionary of Statistics* (London: Routledge, 1884), p. 453. Of these 350,000 were German, 227,500 were British ('English, &c.'), 210,000 were Americans, and 160,000 were Russian.

30 James Bryce to Mrs S. Whitman, 22 Sept. 1886; MS Bryce, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

31 Dorothy Pilley Richards, 'Old Times in Familiar Places', *Ladies Alpine Club Yearbook* (1957): 18–19.

32 Peter Mandler, 'Against "Englishness": English Culture and the Limits to Rural Nostalgia, 1850–1940', in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th ser., 7 (1997): 155–75.

33 See William H. Rollins, *A Greener Vision of Home: Cultural Politics and Environmental Reform in the German Heimatschutz Movement, 1904–1918* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997), and Diana Le Dinh, 'Le Heimatschutz, une ligue pour la beauté: esthétique et conscience culturelle au début du siècle en Suisse', *Histoire et société contemporaines* 12 (1992): 1–152.

34 See reports on the meetings of the English Branch in *Alpine Journal* 23 (1907): 630–2; *Alpine Journal* 24 (1909): 451–3, and in the *Times* and *Morning Post* during 1905–1911.

35 See Revd Henry S. Lunn, *The Grindelwald Conference, 1894* (London: Lunn, 1894).

36 Sir Henry Lunn, *Nearing Harbour* (London: Nicholson and Watson, 1934), p. 68.

37 Public Schools Alpine Sports Club, *Yearbook* (1910): 5.

38 Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War* (London: Reaktion, 1996).

39 See Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991).

40 See Harvey Taylor, *A Claim on the Countryside: A History of the British Outdoor Movement* (Keele: Keele University Press, 1997); see also Chris Waters, *British Socialists and the Politics of Popular Culture, 1880–1914* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990).

41 David Matless, *Landscape and Englishness* (London: Reaktion, 1998), and David Matless, '"The Art of Right Living:" Landscape and Citizenship, 1918–39', in *Mapping the Subject*, ed. Steve Pile and Nigel Thrift (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 93–122.

42 See the comments in Association of British Members of the Swiss Alpine Club, *Annual Report* (1953): 3.

43 See Rainer Amstädter, *Der Alpinismus* (Vienna: WUV-Universitatsverlag, 1996).

44 See Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*, pp. 58–61, 94–5, for the ambivalent British admiration for German motorways, national fitness, and so on in the 1930s.

45 C. F. Meade, 'The Perversion of Mountaineering', *Quarterly Review* 267 (1936): 24–5. For related contemporary discussions, see R. L. G. Irving, *The Romance of Mountaineering* (London: Dent, 1935).

46 See Dane Kennedy, *The Magic Mountains: Hill Stations and the British Raj* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996); Matthew H. Edney, *Mapping an Empire: The Geographical Construction of British India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); and Peter H. Hansen, 'Vertical Boundaries, National Identities: British Mountaineering on the Frontiers of Europe and the Empire, 1868–1914', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 24 (1996): 48–71.

47 Hansen, 'Dancing Lamas of Everest'. See also Patrick French, *Younghusband* (London: Harper Collins, 1994).

48 Francis Younghusband, *Epic of Everest* (London: Longman, 1926), p. 311, and Francis Younghusband, *Everest: The Challenge* (New York: Nelson, 1936).

49 David Matless, 'Nature, the Modern and the Mystic: Tales From Early Twentieth Century Geography', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, n.s., 16 (1991): 272–86.

50 *Kamet Conquered* (1932), National Film and Television Archive, London.

51 See the film *Kamet Conquered* and F. S. Smythe, *Kamet Conquered* (London: Gollancz, 1932), pp. 96, 205.

52 *Wings over Everest* (1934), National Film and Television Archive, London. See also James Douglas-Hamilton, *Roof of the World: Man's First Flight over Everest* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1983).

53 W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood, *The Ascent of F 6* (London: Faber, 1937).
54 For this period, see Peter H. Hansen, 'Confetti of Empire: The Conquest of Everest in Nepal, India, Britain, and New Zealand', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (forthcoming), and Becky Conekin, Frank Mort, and Chris Waters (eds), *Moments of Modernity: Reconstructing Britain, 1945–1964* (London: Rivers Oram, 1999).
55 *Eastern Evening News* (Norwich) 30 Nov. 1933, L/P&S/12/4242, Oriental and India Office Collections, British Library, London (OIOC).
56 See Gordon Stewart, 'Debate: Tenzing's Two Wrist Watches: The Conquest of Everest and Late Imperial Culture in Britain, 1921–1953: Reply', *Past and Present* 157 (1997): 189.
57 See the India Office Minutes in L/P&S/12/4242, OIOC.
58 See Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Minority Histories, Subaltern Pasts', *Postcolonial Studies* 1 (1998): 15–30.
59 *Alpine Journal* 17 (1894–5): 510.

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Modernity and Trusteeship: Tensions of Empire in Britain Between the Wars

Susan Pedersen

Is imperialism modern? At the most basic level, of course it is, for – Schum notwithstanding – Europe's nation states clung to their colonial possessions into our own century, liberal and socialist politicians showing themselves qui alive as any 'atavistic elite' to the ideal as well as the material rewards of em But if we ask a narrower and somewhat different question – the questio imperialism's relation to that cast of mind that, around the turn of the cen began to think of itself as 'modern' – the problem becomes more complicat the 'revolt against rationalism' and the Great War wrought a shift in elite sensibi away from engagement to detachment and from moral seriousness to scepti would the 'civilizing' framework through which the Victorians viewed their en not also have come into question? Could modernism have caused problem imperialism, in other words, less because a younger generation would have f imperial ideals reprehensible than because they found them ridiculous?

This chapter explores this question by examining perceptions of Bi imperialism within two distinct but overlapping intellectual worlds – the lit world of the avant-garde novelist on the one hand, and the political world of li and reform-minded elites on the other. I begin the first investigation by looki the works of two self-consciously modernist writers, Evelyn Waugh and Win Holtby. Both Waugh and Holtby travelled in Africa in the 1920s or 1930s; ins by the spectacle of Haile Sellassie's coronation in the autumn of 1930, published novels two years later exploring Europe's changing relationship to A And while the perspectives from which the two wrote could not have been different – Waugh was a Catholic conservative, Holtby a left-leaning femi both writers struck a self-consciously modern note, casting their novels as com and skewering the mindset, dear to nineteenth-century moralists, that woul Europe's intervention in Africa as a form of international benevolence – as a V Man's Burden, a civilizing mission, *noblesse oblige*. That these 'comedies' v strike us today as embarrassing at best and racist at worst, and that even contemporaries found them shocking or offensive, should not blind us to importance, for they made not only imperialism but also the humanit sensibility that had been its quarrelsome travelling companion seem absurd