

## THE LOVE OF MOUNTAINS

By C. R. P. VANDELEUR

Is the genuine æsthetic appreciation of mountains waning in the climbing fraternity? Is it, indeed, losing ground rapidly? The usual conversation of climbers, especially young climbers, makes one feel so. They will name without hesitation the grade of difficulty to which this or that climb belongs, according to the modern classification, and are generally ambitious to achieve the more severe routes. But any remark one may make about the majesty of a particular mountain or the glory of a summit-view is apt to meet with scant response, if not with silence. Is this because the modern climber is reserved about his deeper feelings, or inarticulate in expressing them? Or is it because those deeper feelings just aren't there? Is it because he is really interested just in climbs, and only in mountains so far as they may provide him with climbs worthy of his notice and opportunities of showing his prowess? My impression is that the latter alternative is true more often than not.

Of course, I am not quarrelling with any mountaineer's keenness to make himself as expert as he possibly can in every branch of his great sport. To do so would be an impertinence on my part. It is the duty of mountaineers to climb all mountains that can be climbed by the traditional methods (*not* by the aid of pitons and karabiners); and many of them, even under reasonable conditions, will demand of a strong party its very best. But what is the full object and end of scaling these mountains? Surely it is something more than the honour and glorification of the men who conquer them, something greater than their records as mountaineers—proud though they may legitimately be of their achievement, and great though their fame should be in the mountaineering world. It is that mountain-lovers should be able to gain a better knowledge of mountains in general, and of particular mountains—the party themselves by their actual experience, others through their photographs and writings. For it is the mountains, rather than our climbing of them, that matter; because they are the most majestic objects on earth.

This feeling for mountains—this homage to them which is their due—is not, I fear, widespread among climbers to-day. A good many of them, indeed, do not seem to regard the more intimate knowledge, or even the conquest, of great mountains as their ultimate aim. As I said, it is climbs, not mountains, that interest them. They would rather climb some gully on our British hills, as long as it is difficult, than one of the easier routes up Mont Blanc or Monte Rosa, which they would regard as a grind, and little more, even though favoured by good weather and the great scenery which those noble mountains



afford. On the only occasion on which I had the privilege of a conversation with Douglas Freshfield, he said something to the effect that climbers were second only to golfers in their addiction to talking shop. His remark surprised me at the time, but I think I have since realised what he meant; and would he not have greater cause to say it to-day? Somewhere, too, he refers caustically to the man who 'is happy only when he is a rock-limpet,' and despises Elbruz. More than once I have known a climber to say that he will not bother to go to the Dolomites because there is plenty of rock-climbing at home; as if difficult and sensational climbing were all the Dolomites have to offer!

All the authors of the real mountaineering classics were great mountain-lovers, though not a few of them would also be accounted good climbers even now. To Leslie Stephen, 'fleetest of foot of the Alpine brotherhood' (so much happier in his praise of the mountains than in his digressions on human topics), the Jungfrau, seen from the Wengern Alp, seemed 'gradually to mould itself out of the darkness, slowly to reveal every fold of its torn glaciers, and then to light up with an ethereal fire,' recalling 'the exquisite lines in Tithonus:

"Once more the old mysterious glimmer steals  
From thy pure brows and from the shoulders pure. . . ."

Freshfield and Conway were great connoisseurs of mountains. Among the many ways in which Freshfield charms us is his frequent comparisons of Caucasian and Himalayan peaks with certain well-loved ones in the Alps. Thus he finds in Tetruld 'a Grivola higher than Mont Blanc.' In one place he compares Simvu to the Blümlisalp, in another to Piz Palü, thus pointing out, probably unintentionally, the resemblance between the latter two mountains. Conway (who, quaintly enough, had always to 'behold' a view, not merely see it!) stands supreme as a genius in finding beautiful and appropriate names for mountains. To him we owe, to mention only a few, the Golden Throne, the Silver Throne, and the Shark's Tooth (Dent du Requin). But best of all, probably, is his Feathers of Hunza. To appreciate the complete aptness of this name one must look at the drawing in his Karakoram book (p. 262). Wonderful that rock-peaks can look so like delicate feathers!—Naturally, he was strongly against naming mountains after men, 'however meritorious.' The prevalence of this custom is indeed deplorable, and says little for the imagination of modern civilised man. Why, for instance, cannot Aorangi ('the cloud-piercer') and Denali ('the great one') be allowed to keep these lovely native names, so full of meaning, instead of being labelled 'Mount Cook' and 'Mount McKinley'?

No mountaineer was ever possessed of a purer love of mountains than F. W. Bourdillon, who wrote of 'the unreasoned, uncovetous, unworldly love of them, we know not why, we care not why, only because they are what they are; because they move us in some way which nothing else does; so that . . . we feel that a world that can give such rapture must be a good world, a life capable of such feeling



must be worth the living.' Yet he believed that, to his fellow mountain-lovers, this feeling was 'so deep and so pure and so personal as to be almost sacred—too intimate for ordinary mention.' And so, he maintained, they hid it, alleging other reasons for their mountaineering.

Even Mummery, whom no present-day climber can afford to regard quite as a back-number, and who doubtless was attracted to the mountains chiefly by the lure of adventure, indeed of danger, was a true mountain-lover, his enthusiasm for their grandeur and beauty breaking out again and again in his writings. His 'boyish delight in the great white peaks towering above the gloom of pines' seems to have remained with him to the end. Every peak he ascended became to him a friend to be revisited. He rightly held that one cannot really know a mountain by climbing it only once.

Collie, who perhaps was nearly as great a climber as Mummery, was also, of course, a very great mountain-lover. He had, however, at least one odd peculiarity—his dislike of the Matterhorn as seen from Zermatt or the Riffelalp! I have heard him say, as he traced its outline in the air: 'It goes like this—and like this—and like this. It's all wrong!' Mont Blanc, he declared, was 'far and away the finest mountain in the Alps.' His writings are often marred by a certain carelessness. (Did he ever fail to split an infinitive?) Yet I know no other author who conveys in quite the same degree the feeling of the fresh air and the free life of the wilds, nor one who could rise to greater heights of beauty—as, for instance, when he tells how 'the twilight slowly passed into the azure night' as they sat by the camp-fire under Nanga Parbat, or the setting sun shone through 'a thin veil of an evening shower' as camp was regained after the conquest of the Diamirai Peak. Yet he seems to have loved the Coolin best of all. His own descriptions are often most happily embellished by appropriate quotations from the poets. And, altogether, his book is of such charm that it deserves to be read far more widely than it is.

Of course, some more recent writers have been, and are, great mountain-lovers, and capable, too, of conveying their passion for them to their readers. Notable among these was Smythe, even though he was capable—if I remember aright—of comparing mountains to cricket-pavilions, a comparison which is not obvious! But, on the whole, the tendency of modern mountaineering literature is to dwell more and more on the details of the climb, on technique (including the use of pitons and karabiners), on transport, commissariat, and the human incidents of the way; and less and less on the mountains themselves, and the views to be had from them. A few distinguished writers still keep alive the true charm of 'the mystic quest,' but the general tendency is for mountaineering to become more and more a sort of business or an inordinate thirst for record-breaking on the crags. Fifty or sixty years ago, Ruskin's gibe about 'soaped poles' was generally not true. Now, far too often, it is.

But, after all, must we not admit that the prestige of the mountains is by no means what it was? The poor old mountains—even the



greatest—cannot hold their own against the inventions of modern man. Even though many summits may never be scaled, it is no longer true, as it was for Leslie Stephen and his contemporaries, that any of them are 'far beyond the reach of mortal man.' It is becoming daily more difficult to look at the sky without seeing the vapour-trail of an aeroplane probably higher than any mountain. Any common object we see—animal, vegetable or mineral—has, as likely as not, been flown from another part of the world at an altitude greater than that of Everest. It is already a commonplace for passengers to cross the Atlantic at 40,000 ft.; and in future, when the conquerors of the highest peaks are resting on the summit, though safe for the time from falling stones or ice, they may still be hit by some ignoble missile from a 'plane passing far above them, while its occupants, safe in their pressurised cabin and enjoying every luxury, think of the mountains only with disdain, if they think of them at all. Neither is this all. For are not scientific men seriously talking about establishing 'space-stations' 1,000 miles above the earth, and even of reaching the moon? Who will dare to predict what the next fifty years may bring forth in this direction? One, at least, of the great mountain-lovers I have quoted would, it seems, have welcomed such developments. 'Who would not rush to visit the other side of the moon,' wrote Conway, 'were such journey possible? If Messrs. Cook were to advertise a trip to Mars, who would not be of the party?' But many of us, perhaps, feel that something very precious is being lost by the mountains being made to seem so small.

The vogue of mountains seems, in fact, to be definitely on the decline. It has not lasted long. It is not yet a hundred years since mountaineering, as a sport, is held to have begun; and only some two hundred since Europeans (apart from the ancients) began to see beauty in mountains, if Rousseau was (as has been said) the first to see it. And already the time is upon us when those whose ambition it is merely to reach on foot the highest parts of the earth's surface will be widely regarded as unadventurous, earth-bound back-numbers.

But, quite apart from anything achieved by man, we have always known that mountains are but small things compared to the earth as a whole. They cannot even quite equal the ocean depths. And even the Himalaya, if represented to scale on an ordinary globe, would impress nobody, because they would be imperceptible. Moreover, our ever-increasing knowledge of the unimaginable vastness of the Universe is for ever increasing our sense of the exceeding smallness of the earth itself. When we are face to face with the mountains, we forget all this; but it is only because we ourselves are so small that they seem to us so great.

Such thoughts are not a little depressing to those of us who really love mountains. But, on the other hand, from a purely mountaineering point of view, it is cheering to reflect that, after all, they are quite big enough. The Alpine giants are the ideal size for pleasurable mountaineering. Higher mountains are rather too much for most of us.



And Everest, at least, has so far proved too much for anybody. If it were much higher, it would be quite out of the question for any party to attempt to conquer it on their 'own ten toes.'

Moreover, every true mountain-lover knows that mere size is only one of the manifold attractions of mountains. Their full glory depends on so many other factors—factors of which it would be superfluous for me to remind anyone who knows them. It is true of mountains, as of other things, that beauty matters more than size, quality than quantity. Certainly, a soaring peak that far over-tops its neighbours (or appears to) is specially impressive. Yet if that same peak were ugly in form and colour, and without atmosphere, what charm would it possess?

The mightiest objects in the Universe are tremendous gaseous globes, greater suns. Yet, though very wonderful in their way, and fascinating to the astronomer, they may seem to many of us to be unattractive, lacking in charm. Compared to them for size, the mountains are as nothing. But for charm give me the mountains! As Bourdillon says, 'they move us in some way which nothing else does.' For myself, I know of nothing else in the Universe that could equally satisfy a particular part of my nature.

Primitive peoples who live among great mountains worship them through awe and fear, conceiving them to be gods and goddesses, or at least their dwelling-places. Modern civilised mountain-loving men, too, have often spoken of worshipping them: and true worship does, in fact, consist of that mingled love and awe which such men feel in their presence. Great snow-mountains, by reason of their purity, seem especially worthy to be regarded as objects of worship. For myself, I have had the spirit of mountain-worship in me from a very early age; and if I were not a Christian, my leanings would be entirely that way, contrary to reason though it obviously is to worship unresponsive excrescences of the earth's crust, even if in form they are like cathedrals. The trouble about mountains, for us mountain-lovers, is that when we see them in their glory we are apt to throw reason to the winds, and to be possessed by a sort of frenzy. Mountain-worship cannot, in the long run, be a satisfactory religion. But, for some of us, 'the unreasoned, uncovetous, unworldly love of them' can, I think, be a stepping-stone, as it were, toward a truer worship. For that reason, even more than for the healthy physical recreation and intellectual problems they afford us, we ought to be thankful that they have been given to us.

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NOTE: As far as my own experience goes, the present generation of young and vigorous climbers is as deeply moved by mountain beauty as was or is any other. It however prefers silence to speech, or to the written word. A few months ago, sunset caught us in winter whilst I was with a large party of young rock-climbers on the Aonach Eagach ridge of Glencoe, and we all stood silent for about ten minutes to admire the glorious mountain view. Not a word had been spoken when we moved on again spontaneously. There is no doubt in my



mind that this and many similar incidents prove that the capacity for being deeply moved by mountain scenes is widespread amongst climbers in general.

The modern silence about these emotions is probably an understandable reaction to the way in which they were over-worked in mountaineering literature between the two wars, and with much confusion of thought. In that literature, beauty tended to be ascribed without discrimination to mountains in general, whereas some mountains are ugly; and there was a tendency to describe the mountaineer's supreme motive as a quest for mountain beauty or for its 'spiritual' effects, which were apparently claimed to be adequate rewards for any risks or hardships involved in the climbing. It was also suggested, and sometimes openly claimed that the enjoyment of these immaterial objectives was denied to 'athletic' climbers, and was reserved to a small élite of contemplative men who were endowed with peculiar sensitivity.

Greater clarity of thought and in the use of words would have lessened the extravagance of that mountain literature. Thus the general use of the words 'mountain climbing' to denote so different activities as difficult hand-and-foot work and pedestrian ascents of hills made it possible to write of 'contemplative climbing'—an absurdity, because true climbing makes contemplation impossible during the activity. Again, the intellectual and physical pleasures of real climbing differ completely from the æsthetic and spiritual pleasures given by fine mountain scenery; and further, the best viewpoints are rarely places upon which the best climbing is to be had. These different pleasures are quite different objectives which draw most (if not all) individual mountaineers to steep climbing and to hill walks on different occasions; and, as Mummery himself said in other words, why on earth should mountain scenery not be enjoyed by the same man who enjoys real climbing for its own sake?

I think that all true climbers enjoy these two different sorts of pleasure, and I am sure that the younger men of to-day do not differ in this from their predecessors. Where they differ perhaps lies in their more critical attitude to the 'mystical' mountaineering literature of the inter-war years; and, detecting as they do its weaknesses—the evocative descriptions of æsthetic or other emotions claimed to have been experienced in situations where the actual climbing must have absorbed the whole attention, its other incompatible mixings, its unwarranted assumptions, and so forth—the younger men may feel that a suspicion of artificiality, even of insincerity, would attend any expression of æsthetic emotion in their own accounts of climbs. In any case they seem to keep more or less quiet about their own experiences of that sort.—*Editor.*