The Golden Age in the Alps and the founding of the Alpine Club came about, in part, owing to the release of middle-class capital, time and energy when, in mid-nineteenth century Britain, keeping a mistress ceased to be socially acceptable. At least that is the myth disseminated by Ronald W Clark in his history of climbing *Men, Myths and Mountains*. His invention of such an improbable scenario perhaps reflects the lack of legends available when he was trying to make the text fit the title. So far as East Africa is concerned, there is no shortage of what might be termed ‘genuine’ myths. These go back at least as far as Ptolemy and the Mountains of the Moon. If we accept that the snowy equatorial headsprings of the Nile are not an Arabic addition to Ptolemy’s text, how did he get the Ruwenzori right? A pure invention, a truly random guess, is highly improbable. Perhaps the flooding of the Nile suggested to the Greeks an analogy with the snow-fed spring floods of their own country. This would make the possibility of equatorial snow mountains a more acceptable concept. The conclusion that someone from the classical world actually penetrated the heart of Africa 2000 years before Stanley, and either saw the glaciated mountains or heard of them from local people, derives from other information on the region subsequently shown to be correct. Pygmies still live at the foot of the Mountains of the Moon. Each of the two headstreams of the White Nile passes through a large lake. Ptolemy placed these lakes some 10° too far south, a pardonable error on the part of his informant who probably felt as if he had travelled the extra 1000km that this represents!

It is instructive, at this point, to quote Baron von Müller writing in the *Geographical Journal* in 1850:

In the land of the Bari Negroes, under 4°10’N ... the inhabitants say that the river proceeds from the country, Ajan, 30 days’ journey to the south, where it flows in four streams from a high mountain ... The Bhar el Abied [White Nile] comes from a high mountain the top of which is quite white ... 

Thirty days’ journey would represent a distance of about 450km. This approximates to the distance von Müller was from the Ruwenzori. In the Little Ice Age of the mid-nineteenth century the snowfields would have
been more conspicuous than they are today. A group of traders from Egypt, enjoying some immunity to tropical diseases, could have reached the same place 2000 years earlier and collected relevant information. They would not have faced any greater difficulties; indeed, the disruption of the large-scale slave trade of the 1800s will have ensured that von Müller needed the firearms his predecessors lacked. The greatest improbability would seem not to be that the journey was made in the years before the birth of Christ but that any echo of it has survived.

A more substantial record exists in the case of Kilimanjaro. Diogenes, a Greek trader along the Arabian coasts, was blown southwards to make a landfall on the eastern coast of Africa presumed to be in the vicinity of Dar es Salaam. From there he claimed to have travelled inland for 25 days and to have reached lakes and a snow mountain he believed was the source of the Nile. Kilimanjaro is the only snow mountain likely to have been reached in the time available; to its west lie several substantial lakes. Ptolemy or his copyists merged this new information with the earlier report and interpolated a mountain range – the Luna Montes.

Thereafter, the Mountains of the Moon occupied several positions on the map of Africa. For some nineteenth century geographers they formed the eastern end of the fabulous Kong Mountains. This 5000km range spanned Africa along 7°N, reportedly reaching the snowline for much of that distance. It is a sad loss for African alpinism that no one since Burton has been able to find them. Livingstone was convinced that Ptolemy had been correct in locating them at 12°S. He died, wasted by malaria and malnutrition, drained by tropical ulcers, dysentery and ruptured piles, trying to persuade himself that the hills which rose a few metres above the stinking swamps were the mountains at the source of the Nile.

Dr Charles Beke, an early traveller in the Ethiopian Highlands, showed commendable originality when, ignoring precedent, he rotated the range through 90° so that it ran north–south from Ethiopia to Kilimanjaro. His readiness to adjust the location of the Mountains of the Moon to accord with any new information that became available earned him little credit. Cooley, the archetypal armchair geographer, said of him: ‘... Whether inland or on the coast wherever his hovering theories alight for a moment, there we have Ptolemy and the Mountains of the Moon.’

One of Beke’s sources was Captain Short who claimed to have sailed a schooner some 400km up the river Jura, a river which proved unnavigable to von der Decken’s steamboat some ten years later. Short reported seeing some distance to the west ‘high mountains with white tops’. The site, according to the Survey of Kenya, is a vast plain. The mountains were at best a mirage enhanced perhaps by the use of the rum glass rather than the eye glass as an aid to vision.

At almost the same time, Krapf, the first European since Diogenes to penetrate the East African hinterland, had a brief sight of a genuine snow mountain. Mount Kenya was added to the already ‘discovered’ Kilimanjaro,
which had been seen and reported by a white man, Rebmann, a year earlier compounding a controversy already blazing in journal correspondence columns. Several myths rose with the smoke. One extreme had the missionaries, Krapf and Rebmann, characterised as liars or purblind fools for suggesting that snow existed at the equator. At the other extreme, the membership of the Royal Geographical Society, from the comfort of armchairs in London, maliciously denigrated the reports of honest travellers.

The possibility of permanent snow on the equator was never seriously questioned. Reports by frostbitten conquistadors of the snowfields of the high Andes of Ecuador had been current since the early sixteenth century and confirmed by later travellers such as Humboldt. The unsettled question was whether the African mountains were high enough. Kilimanjaro would be about 6000m high if the descriptions of the extent of the snow were correct. At that height it should be visible to a sea-level observer more than 300km away, yet there were no reports of a sighting from Mombasa and the missionaries did not report seeing it until they had travelled inland for many days. The only estimate Krapf gave of its height was ‘more than 12,500ft’, an estimate which served to undermine rather than increase confidence.

The one genuine armchair geographer was the Irish scholar Cooley, who devoted his skills as a linguist and mathematician to the painstaking collation of geographical data from travellers from classical times to his own day. In the process he was acclaimed for exposing a fraud by a French explorer. This seems to have given him delusions of infallibility – a dangerous state of mind given the uncertain quality of much of the information he relied upon. In the context of East Africa he was on the record as maintaining that, while ‘Kilimanjara’ (as he called it) was the highest mountain in the area, its top was covered not by snow but by red cornelians! When the missionaries and later explorers reported snow, he pilloried them.

Keeping Cooley company were explorers such as Humboldt (briefly), Barth, Burton, and Livingstone himself. The two latter were careful, in public, to avoid outright denial, but both shared a burning ambition to be immortalised as the discoverer of the source of the Nile. Krapf’s theory that the headstream would be found running NW from ‘Mt Kenia’ represented a threat, as he might then share the glory and attract the financial support that they themselves required.

Sir Roderick Murchison had no such inhibitions. As either the occupant of the Royal Geographical Society throne as President or the power behind it, he was the dispenser of financial support. Though he had never visited Africa, he was an eminent practical geographer and geologist. From the Peninsular under Wellington to the Urals as the Tsar’s geologist, he had travelled widely in Europe. Initially he had accepted the existence of the snow mountains, but the case Cooley made against them led him to become an outspoken and influential sceptic. Apart from the vexed question of height there was the possibility, fostered by Livingstone, that the
glittering summits might well be quartzite or some similar white rock. Partisans of the opposite persuasion had identified over a dozen 'snow mountains', some of which had already proven otherwise, undermining faith in any of them. None the less, virtually all those who expressed opinions at the RGS and in the press were supportive of the missionaries and the matter was closed by von der Decken's report on his expedition of 1861-62, though Livingstone and Cooley appear never to have conceded defeat.

The publication of *The Ice Cap* by the Mountain Club of East Africa in 1932 gave currency to a myth with apparently even older roots than the Mountains of the Moon. A Lutheran missionary, Dr Reusch, reported that while in Ethiopia he had been told that the crater of Kibo was the last resting place of Menelik I, the son of Solomon and Sheba. Returning from a campaign on his southern boundaries, the king had camped on the Saddle, the broad col between Kibo and Mawenzi. Like so many recent visitors in that high, bleak place, he felt old, tired of life and close to death. Despite suffering from the altitude, he carried on up next day, accompanied by his nobles and by slaves carrying his treasure. The nobles returned. Menelik, his slaves and his treasure remained in the crater.

The old Abyssinian soldiers and hunters who told Reusch this story seem to have displayed a very sophisticated knowledge of the topography of such a distant mountain. While it is possible that the legend is an authentic antique, the suspicion is that either the Ethiopian authorities circulated the story widely to give credence to territorial claims, or that the Rev Reusch had reverted to the habits of his exuberant youth as a Cossak Captain and was telling a good tale. Livingstone recorded that some Arabs believed that Kilimanjaro contained mummies, like the pyramids of Egypt, but Krapf, who spent four years in Ethiopia and spoke the language, made no mention of either legend in his *Travels*, despite a proprietary interest in Kilimanjaro.

The most recent myth to emerge dates from the centenary of the first ascent of Kilimanjaro. A Tanzanian paper published an interview with Jonas Louwa who had guided Meyer and Purtscheller on their successful climb. In common with the experience of many Africans in the colonial period, he seems to have been invisible to the Europeans, who make no mention of him. Louwa's claim cannot have been simply a matter of self-advertisement. After all, at the age of 120 years he could surely have enjoyed international celebrity as the oldest man in the world. To judge from the photo, in which he looks not a day over 70, he could easily have coped with the consequent fame.

Halford Mackinder, a man in whom great ability was harnessed to enormous ambition, envisaged Mount Kenya as a pedestal for self-advertisement. By being the first to stand on it he would come to the notice of a much wider public than the limited circle which knew him as a proselyting academic geographer. He had political ambitions and had stood for
Parliament within a year of returning from Africa. As a non-mountaineer he set out to create the myth that he was one. His expedition was an elegant piece of opportunism. The geologist Gregory's brilliant 'solo' effort in 1894 had established that there appeared to be a practicable ice route to the summit. (His judgement proved absolutely sound when, in 1950, Firmin and Bagenal made the first continuous ascent of the Southern Glaciers route, in effect following the footsteps of the Alpine guides César Ollier and Joseph Brocherel.) Freshfield, Mackinder's partner in what the old guard at the RGS dismissed as 'educational rioting', was uniquely qualified to advise on mountaineering matters. He probably directed Mackinder's attention to the necessity of professional help to make up for his lack of experience as a mountaineer. Mackinder had spent a single brief season in Zermatt, plodding up the Dom and some minor peaks behind a guide. By 1899 he was able to justify a sabbatical term which, combined with the long summer vacation, would give five months for the round trip. The Uganda Railway had reached what was to become Nairobi. His brother-in-law, Sidney Hinde, a senior administrator based in the Kenya Highlands, gave the expedition essential information, practical help and, above all, 'clout' in dealing with local difficulties. Curzon's friendship, dating from their undergraduate days, was exploited to get red tape cleared at the British end, while Campbell Hausburg, a second brother-in-law, was willing and able to finance the expedition.

There is little in Mackinder's later writings to indicate that he fully appreciated what a serious proposition Mount Kenya would prove to be. Once close enough to see the peak, Ollier can have had no such delusions. A native of Courmayeur, he must have been struck by similarities between the southern aspects of Mount Kenya and Mont Blanc. The latter is on a larger scale but they both display the same awesomely steep aiguilles, menacing seracs and complex arêtes. Rock with characteristics similar to Mont Blanc granite must have been a reassuring discovery.

Although Mackinder, in his published accounts, makes no reference to preliminary exploration, his guides had several days in which to make a determined attempt to find a way up the eastern side of Nelion's south ridge. Ollier's route is still essentially the same as today's voie normale – except for the misnamed Mackinder's Chimney. Its first ascent must have been too dramatic for Mackinder to have dismissed as one of the three mauvais pas he mentions in his diaries. Even today, armed with protection pegs, free of ice and cleared of loose rock, it fully deserves its grade IV. In 1929 it looked so daunting that Shipton and Wyn Harris were relieved to find an alternative round the corner. In 1899 it would have been intimidating, with abundant ice and an unprotected crux at the top – an overhanging scree-capped boulder. It was little wonder that Shipton and Harris were impressed by Mackinder's performance. Mackinder's guides had reconnoitred the route in the days prior to the first attempt on the summit.
The aid and comfort provided by a fixed rope and a top rope must have diminished Mackinder's appreciation of the route's severity and seriousness. There is evidence, however, that Mackinder, in his effort to extract the maximum credit from his own performance, deliberately set out to minimise the contribution of his guides. Methodical fieldworker that he was, he made notes during the climb. The detail recorded there differs from his subsequent written-up diary and both differ from his published accounts. The crucial sections date from the day of the ascent and the preceding days. The account in the Geographical Journal has César and Joseph 'defeated by the peak ... [They] had laboriously cut their way up the Darwin Glacier, and, bad weather intervening, could neither mount higher nor yet return by the dangerous way they had come. They managed, however, to effect a traverse to the south arête, and returned by the route which we had followed in the first attempt.'

The field-diary makes no mention of bad weather, though some afternoon hail would be normal and no more than a nuisance on an ice route. It describes how César and Joseph climbed the rib on the western side of the Upper Darwin Glacier, left a fixed rope when they descended and cut a line of steps to the south arête of Nelion. They were capable of continuing to the summit but did not do so because they were, after all, employed to take Mackinder there. They could also have used their ascent steps for the descent, but their plan was presumably to keep their employer off unprotected ice slopes as much as possible so that he could enjoy the security of the rock.

Returning to complete the ascent with their employer, they cut a line of 'bucket' steps slowly and laboriously up the Diamond Glacier. Ollier would have known that the time of greatest danger for the party would be the descent, when Mackinder's nerve would be tested by being forced to look into the abyss and when his tired legs would be least steady. Each large, secure step required 20 or 30 axe blows. This was energy well spent, but gave rise to yet another myth: the amazing hardness of equatorial ice. The nature of ice and the laws of physics do not change at the equator. The Diamond Glacier is neither steeper nor harder than the average hanging glacier. Exposed to the drop down the Diamond Couloir and at an altitude of 5000m, it is understandable that it should feel as if it were.

Denying Mackinder the credit he sought as a climber does not detract from his real achievement of seeing and seizing his chance and of finally getting to the top, his strength of character more than compensating for his limited experience. It is ironic that the recent publication of his book of the expedition has seen, with the help of his editor, the inflation of a further potentially damaging myth – that eight of his Zanzibari porters were executed. Fifty porters were contracted from the agents under explicit terms. These specified that for mutiny, a second attempted desertion, desertion with the theft of arms, striking an officer, or incitement to these offences, a summary punishment of thirty lashes could be administered. Execution
was not an option. If eight porters were shot, self-defence would have been the only justification and only credible if it had been reported to the authorities. The fifty surviving Zanzibaris could hardly be bribed or bullied into silence. The authorities in Kenya would not have been willing to connive in a cover-up. Mackinder had made himself very unpopular, forcing his party through over their objections and, as they had predicted, he had needed to be rescued. The expedition's supply problems and poor relationship with the Kikuyu chief Wangombe had resulted in the despatch of two armed relief columns – this at a time when they were already having to deal with a famine, a smallpox epidemic, the after-effects of a mutiny, the start of a rebellion and the threat of a Masai civil war. Mackinder's high-handed style in pursuit of an overtly recreational objective must have struck a discordant note on very taughtly stretched people. He deserved and would get no favours. If eight men had been executed he would undoubtedly have been called to account.

As conditions around Mount Kenya became more settled, the mythology of the African peoples was recorded. One feature was common to all. God – 'Ngai' – lived on Mount Kenya and did not welcome visitors. In Kikuyu tradition he had taken the founding father of the tribe to the top, shown him the wonderful forest land he was being given and where he would find a woman who would cultivate and populate it for him. The Masai version has their ancestor being given pasture land and cattle. Significantly, both tribes are, in terms of the millennia of human occupation of East Africa, relatively recent immigrants, their ancestors arriving probably within the last 500 years. The myth gives them some title to the land, a real 'moral high ground'. Only the vaguest stories are told of the people they displaced, who withdrew up the mountain. Names survive – Agumbo, Akiek, Memena – but little else. They are described as short in stature, often hairy hunters who lived in caves. In one tradition the last few survivors changed themselves into turacos – bright, noisy forest birds. Raymond Hook was convinced that a regular pattern of earth mounds in the vicinity of Urumandi marked their attempts at cultivation.

They had a supporting cast of mythical animals: the cheetah-like 'kitanga' of the forest and the hairy snake of alpine zones. There was an elephant (last reports were in the 1920s) with tusks so massive that they dragged on the ground. It presumably had to walk backwards to avoid snagging them in the bush. In the 1930s attention was focused on the 'maz roi', a subspecies of spotted lion, expensively and fruitlessly sought by Gandar-Dower. He did discover a lake at almost 4000m which he modestly named Lake Gandar. He was deprived of his memorial when the authorities, having had the Duchess of Gloucester's permission to honour the mountain with a lake called Alice, had failed to find another candidate.

A climbing exploit on Mount Kenya with mythical qualities involved a French expedition in 1952. From Kenya to Kilimanjaro, the book of the expedition, was devastatingly reviewed in both the Alpine Journal and
the Bulletin of the Mountain Club of Kenya. The latter was waspish enough to elicit the threat of a libel action. The group had taken several days to get to the high point reached in one day by Harris and Shipton - a vertical ascent of about 200m. Their ‘summit’ party then spent most of a day pegging up a couple of pitches to the top of the wall which had turned Harris and Shipton back in 1929. Perhaps this triumph inspired the French party to superhuman efforts, because it apparently took them only from 4.30 to 5pm to get from there to the summit of Batian. They had already been on the go since 2am. The ground between them and Shipton’s Notch on the summit ridge is not technical, but involved a height gain of about 100m and they claimed to have found some pitches of III and IV. From the Notch to the top required a further 100m of ascent and rather more than 100m in distance along a superb airy ridge. The climbing is not difficult but finding the easiest route is tricky. A party could be satisfied if it took them two hours from the top of the wall to the summit (Iain Allan’s estimate of the time it took his party). A quarter of that time is just not credible. No summit pictures were produced, though they claimed to have reached the summit in daylight with a camera and a CAF flag to wave. The flag and a cache of pegs were later found at the top of the wall. There was no note left in the tobacco tin on the summit to show that they had been there. Their description of the climb gave no detail of any of the features of the route, but it did allow that ordinary climbers might take an hour over it. Altogether a very sorry tale.

Myths and legends continue to accrue to the mountains of East Africa. Few of them concern mountaineering; in these critical days, claims are subject to analysis which aborts otherwise promising myth material. The local media, however, as witnessed by the case of Jonas the Centenarian, have no such inhibitions. With an often unsophisticated market to serve and with columns to fill, newspapers continue the time-honoured tradition of a good story taking precedence over probability. Moreover, the significance of the mountains in local culture stimulates the fantasies of would-be prophets. The several sole ascents of Nelion by the barefoot zealot Ephraim underline the power of religious belief.

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