

## AN ALPINE AURA

BY GEOFFREY WINTHROP YOUNG

(A paper read before the Club after the Centenary General Meeting on December 10, 1957.)

IN celebrating the hundredth anniversary of any individual life, we are concerned with the past, with applause for its achievement, and for a notable survival. We are less concerned with its future, since about this there must always be too much uncertainty for festivity. But the centenary of an institution involves this second and very vital interest. For its future, also, is to have a history, and by a true detection of what has happened in the past to its members, and in its organisation, and by a fortunate interpretation, we may not only enjoy the pleasure of prophecy, but even, if we live long enough, the surprise of fulfilment. We know that the appeal of all History is a poetic appeal. It is the poetic tragedy of human life and its passing, the poetry in its relationships, the romance of its spiritual elevation above the realisation of its own fate, which give to history its epic, and its lyrical quality. On looking back along the long vista of a country's happenings and changes, even the most prosaic mind may discover, under the surface-facts, undercurrents of collective feeling persisting and in the end proving either beneficial or disastrous, but imperceptible to any individual at the time, or to any shorter view.

In celebrating the hundred years' existence of the Alpine Club, and its past achievement, we know that it has a future also; and we grow curious at once to know what there was in its past, characteristic and persistent, which held the promise of beneficial continuance? It is only upon the longer, and backward view, over the century, that there has emerged for me slowly—though it may have been longer apparent to many of your penetrating minds—one notable, perhaps unique, characteristic, or we may call it colouration, of our Club's personality. It is, that this seemingly chance association, of men of very varied professions, mostly of mediocre fortune and modest social position, has enjoyed, and from its origin, a wholly exceptional status, both individually for its members and collectively.

This singular esteem was a matter of remark from the first. In Arnold Lunn's lively and compendious *Century of Mountaineering*, for an instance, he quotes John Stogdon, an independent mountaineer if ever there was one, as saying to him, 'You have little idea of the

awe with which climbers were regarded in the 70's'. This awe has been accepted ever since so much as a matter of course, that the grounds for it have never been questioned. Indeed, by the time of our second and third generation, we breathed its atmosphere already as that of a Law of Nature.

But other organisations, responsible for different forms of sport in our country, far more authoritative and important, say the Royal Yacht Squadron or the Jockey Club, have never had this conceded even to their wealth and social position. In the unions controlling our games, the authority has never been more than official, often almost anonymous. Their individual members have shone with no such reflected glory from their association; they have moved under no club halo, such as set the mountain pioneers apart in public estimation and has kept them ever since distinguished, if eccentric.

If we look for a comparison, we may find a nearer resemblance in the kind of regard isolating a religious foundation or a medieval *Vehmgericht*. Such criticism as there has been, strident at times and even audible in the highest quarters, has retained always a quality of respect, sceptical and acid perhaps, as born of envy, but never bold to mock. We note too that, however dissimilar they were in their interests, or in their tempers, our earlier members held each other in this same exceptional regard as though aware of some unusual bond. The thought and the correspondence devoted to the claims of new candidates, had the solemnity of an initiation. Members of the fellowship clearly felt a more than ordinary responsibility in their recommendations. The interviews and letters for example, as between Alfred Wills the proposer, the consultant elders, my father and myself, over my election, not yet sixty years ago, had a caution and dignity of approach proper only to some ceremonial admission to an Order. How far this may have survived the tear in and the wear out of another half century, it is for you to judge.

We accepted it, when we joined, the youngest and most mutinous of us, as the atmosphere appropriate to our sacred mountaineering; and I for one, even as a doubting Cambridge Thomas, never stopped to look for a reason why. It enveloped us, a mixture of tradition, faint awe, and sacrosanct order, with a deep undercurrent of kinship, through which the kindly elder Olympians moved as our friends.

I wrote once in the past of my impressions of my first Alpine dinner in the *Café Royal*; when the figures of mountain legend moved down out of their heroic images in the arras on the walls, materialising in grave converse round the table, with the right thunderous intervals of disagreement. There was no questioning then, in our minds, as to how the bearded clergymen, bankers and industrialists had acquired their halo. It was omnipresent, and with subdued rainbow lights.

When Charles Pilkington, of the trim silver beard and blue eyes, read his record of Fifty Years at the Jubilee meeting, and happened to touch on Ryan and myself, with our few youthful Alpine seasons as, 'That somewhat centrist school', it came inspiritingly out of the width and depth of that initial mountain enthusiasm, which had swept him and his brother Laurence, Gardiner and Hulton, largely and lavishly across the Alpine monarchs, and made all lesser ranging appear, to them, a fixation. There was the same royal note in Alfred Wills's silvery remote voice, speaking at the Jubilee dinner; in Fred Morshead's stern, staccato memories; the same prophetic amplitude in John Llewellyn Davies' comment to me, made in magnificent age, when I had told him how we moderns united ourselves with the rope; 'Then'—and his voice deepened—'then, your pace must be limited to that of the slowest of your party!' In the Jubilee general meeting once more, when among the front seats in the hall the reminiscent echoes of 'fifty years' had momentarily slackened, suddenly, far down the distant rows, a figure unknown to us, all in grey and silver, leapt to its feet—and when Francis Tuckett challenged in ringing tones—'Sixty-five years ago, when I crossed my first pass . . .!'—it might as unquestionably have been the first Viking from the great landings, leaping back into later time with the salt spray glistening on his beard.

For many years before and after this, we met, after our humdrum days, in this distinctive Alpine lighting, which seemed always to give outline and a finer type of reality to our colleagues from other worlds of work. The long line of our presidents, our lawyers, judges, soldiers, bishops, politicians, the men of art or learning and the many more of us of the common herd, all became genuine, and sympathetic to one another, on this one footing, in this one certainty. The feeling which every one of us had for mountains, by some happy transference, pervaded the Club, and in a sense, enshrined the members for each other.

In this company, I may assume the acceptance of this mountain response; the response awakened in us by the sight, by the contact, by the memory, even by the anticipation or imagining of the nobility of angle, of colouration, of changing surface, and of the alternating hazard and security for hand and foot, which belongs to great mountains, and great mountaineering, alone.

Upon the nature or origin of that feeling, we are all still free to speculate. Lately I ventured some speculations<sup>1</sup> about the possible influence of mountain proportion, as an environment, upon the first development of human intelligence, with an attempt to account for the local character of this development or break-through; and, incidentally,

<sup>1</sup> *A. J.* 62. 192; and *The Influence of Mountains upon the Development of Human Intelligence* (W. P. Ker Memorial Lecture, 1956).

for the semi-divine or fourth-dimensional quality of the relationship between some men and some hills. But of this, all that is relevant to what I am considering this evening, is the deduction that, just as we can experience in dreams atavistic terrors inherited from prehistoric ancestors, so also the primitive awe inspired during the period of direct mountain influence upon the human mind, may return upon and possess our consciousness, or it may be suddenly kindled in any one of us by a mountain in view, and even by the mountain idea in picture or book.

It is true, by the way, and I have experienced it myself, that as we look back over single sections of Club history, the half century for instance, alive with the personalities we knew, it is the disagreements between the restless and the more mature, or the surges towards splinter movements, recurrent in the spring-tide of every new entry, which may catch the eye, and detain an amused interest. But I have been suggesting to you, that, if we look back further, over the long century, then, as happens in any view when we extend our horizon, the proportions alter, salient details sink, and the dominant lines emerge; in our case it is the underlying sympathy, the unspoken community of mountain feeling, of tradition, and action, which are seen to have cemented the succeeding generations of our Club. The *mountains* have stood first with us; and we have caught and held their reflection. And this I have termed the *Alpine Aura*.

Such has been our past, and this is how it can be read. How far can the reading guide our future?

When I was engaged with the history of climbing in Britain, for Wilfrid Noyce's *Snowdon Biography*, I discovered for the first time how great, even during those fifty years or so, had been the change in the whole mountaineering approach. Steadily, imperceptibly but effectively, the stress, the interest, in mountain climbing, had shifted from the mountain and all that belonged upon it, to the climber, and the way he was made or could make himself. During these years of an actual change, however, so deeply, were we—was I—impregnated with the idea of the mountain as the basis, and object, of all climbing, that to me, at least, even though I had then undertaken a formulation of our rudimentary climbing technique, it had never occurred that any form of climbing passion, as it developed, could be anything but an extension of the relationship with mountains. So much so, that later, when I was responsible for some years for the policy of the Club, I was ready to encourage the introduction of every expedient and device which could stretch our ageing Club bottleneck to meet and contain the desires, conveniences and appetites of all the post-war and commando richness of new climbing vintage. Some of us still could grasp no other, than that every rock effervescence must be potential mountain wine.

However, after a further period, when fashion in a flood, let loose the new climbing fervour over every sort of landscape, it became impossible not to reconsider whether these novel and detached approaches or techniques, as they multiplied in quantity, might not differ also in quality? As deviations, did they ever necessarily touch mountains at all?

I am not thinking of a few recent fantastic extensions of sensational, public, climbing interest. The cat that climbed the Matterhorn, and created almost as much popular emotion as any dog in space; or the donkey on the Jungfrauoch, with a glacier technique equal to restraining its ducal associate from walking into the bergschrund. But our own young men also were dreaming dreams. One, introduced as having been of the Everest party and therefore an authority on adventure, assured many millions of us that he would prefer to take some part in launching a sputnik into space, because that heralded a new era, to sharing in an Everest campaign, which was but the expiring flicker of an age outworn. Such a mind, having misconceived the so-called 'conquest' of a summit as the be-all and end-all of mountaineering, found it no more perverse to say, that, rather than share in one heroic episode in the hardest and most enduring training ever contrived to reinforce the spirit of young manhood through many ages to come, he preferred to assist in dispatching a rocketing dog some atmospheres higher than his contemporaries could shoot a rocketing pheasant.

Yet another dreamed, but dreamed more mildly; this time, of Zermatt as a convalescent climbing home. Where the aged and the invalid should totter up and down the east and west walls and overhangs of the Zinal Rothorn, the west and northerly faces of the Weisshorn, the west and northerly aspects of the Dent Blanche; queueing up for cosy constitutionals up the north and south faces of the Matterhorn, and doubtless, jostling one another in joyful senility, off the Täschhorn southern precipice.

These perhaps were warning dreams. But, of course, it was the purport and the magnitude of the widely disseminated new rock expertise, which awakened real doubt, and shook a century of certitude. Was this at one with our Alpine tradition, and its fraternity? Did it bear evidence of that *feeling for mountains* without which no man is a mountaineer?

These armies of boys and girls, practising their wholesome, open-air week-end callisthenics, flooding up the valleys in hale and hearty chase of pins and needles, upon which to thread their ropes and clamp and cushion their athletic limbs upside-down. Was theirs the same relationship as ours, with the harsh and wind-swept summits and the more distant white domes? Was theirs perhaps only a nodding acquaintance?—or some platonic crossing of a high pass in order to be able warmly to embrace a new rock buttress? I wondered. And I

wondered again, most futilely, this last Easter, as I looked up at the head of an old hill friend, abandoned once again to solitude through the years, and somnolent above the clanking of the slab-queues far below—supposing I were to shout from the road the Old Testament alarm cry, ‘The Philistines be upon thee, Samson!’ would he rouse up, and shake his vasty shoulders, and the fetters and the rings fall about his rocky knees like wintry-sounding scree?

Much that we read also in journals, of these new climbing ways helps very little to solve the doubt. When we wrote in the past of a mountain climb, we had all the beautiful variants of a native language, English, French, Italian, to tell others veraciously what the mountain, and the ascent, were like, and what we ourselves experienced. It was a humane and sociable sharing between ourselves, and sometimes an incitement to the lay public. On the other hand, of chief value now, it might seem, is to picture the personal prowess of the climber symbolically, using a terse telegraphese, and with half the alphabet clustering and chaperoned down the page by tedious, depressed and repetitive adjectivals.

Climbing as a technique, and in the abstract, upon anything, or even in a void, is admirable as exercise, and it is in many cases associated with genuine mountain feeling. But as a technique, it is subordinate, and it can in no way be a substitute for the possession of the feeling. Supposing all this gay-hearted, rock-bound host were accepted as equally mountaineers, and were to be included within our tradition and an Alpine company, might we not have to fear a dilution, in which mountaineering, as we know it to be, might be finally swamped, under a tide-water of technique and tourism, and travel agency?

One straw did indeed float past on the flood; and I grasped at it. Violin players have explained to me that the line between the second-rate and the first-rate performer lies, not in the failure of the hands to execute, but in the inability of the mind, mentally rehearsing, to conceive of the successful solution by the fingers. Suddenly, and similarly, I overheard a great rock expert remarking that the mastery of supreme rock difficulty was only possible if the mind continued concentrated upon the solution, between physical attempts. The problems had first to be resolved imaginatively. When I saw the result in action, I realised how miraculously the body could be transformed, as a whole, into such an instrument of the mind; every limb, every sinew, was contributing harmoniously and simultaneously to each whole movement, as beforehand imaginatively determined.

This did bring such climbing at once into the region of the higher and imaginative processes. And yet?—and yet?—was it only into a region of the higher mechanics? For, what part do mountains, or their appreciation, necessarily play in it? Such superlative, but none

the less ancillary skills may go with a love of mountaineering, or they may lead to it. But alone, and of itself, rock-climbing skill is not—oddly enough—a touch-stone for the possession of the mountaineering spirit.

Mountaineering cannot exist divorced from mountains ; from their aesthetic appreciation, and from the strong, and continuous, response to them which carries a man back, with equal delight, to the mountain he has failed to climb, the mountain he has not climbed, and the mountain he may have climbed half a dozen times.

What held us together for a century may, then, well guide, or condition, our future as a Club. Not personal prowess, or competitive achievement. But the understanding of that which mountains—and mountains only—mean to us : the long harsh days of endurance and discipline, on deep snow ; the hours of splendid sunshine, of glorious self-forgetfulness, and of movement as upon wings, into adventure, into beauty, and, best of all into the unknown ; the hours of blizzard, and of iced rocks, and of the little cat's-paws of fear, that die away again as fate is pushed back step by step and grip by grip. Most memorable—that hour before dawn, upon cold high glaciers, with darkness shifting frostily upon formless shadows, and the long sighs out of unseen space quivering through the suspense, that suspense we all have known among mountains at this hour, the cold craving for life which filled chaos before earth took form.

And then—the miracle of the coming of light, as it breaks only over great mountains. Light alive with a purpose, the assertion of new being ; not merely the ending of darkness, but a light which creates everything anew at each dawn, calling all the peaks and glaciers about us into a new declaration of lovely forms and colours, and bringing out of dead matter and darkness a fresh resurgence of cleansing spirit, into which we ourselves are absorbed as we begin to climb, and in which we feel ourselves to have been newly refashioned.

It is to give an opportunity for the discovery of these experiences, to that element in our race which will, most surely, persist so long as any remain with human rather than robot characteristics upon the globe, that is, to those who *love mountains*, that we may wish for a continuance of our Alpine fellowship, and for that of all kindred, true-mountaineering companies.

At the conclusion of the paper, Mr. Alfred Zürcher, Vice-President, said :

‘ It is difficult for me to find the right words to express our thanks to Mr. Young. All I can say is, thank you very much indeed.

‘ During the twenty-five years I climbed with Joseph Knubel, on

very many occasions, in the valleys, on the hills, or on the top of a high mountain, our talk turned to Herr Young. (Knubel would never omit the "Herr".) Once when I asked him whom he personally considered his best amateur climber, he said without hesitation: "Mr. Young was just as good in the mountains as I ever was"; probably the finest compliment one of the world's most famous guides could ever pay.

'Personally I happen to know a lot of well-known and outstanding mountain climbers from many parts of the world, but wherever and whenever the name of Geoffrey Winthrop Young is mentioned, he is not only highly honoured as an outstanding climber but greatly admired throughout the Alpine world as a gentleman *sans reproche*.'