

Because it's there – and all that

Key Reynolds

- 1) 'Such persons as have not traversed mountains of the first order, will with difficulty form an idea of what repays the fatigues which are experienced, and the dangers which are undergone there. Still less will they be able to imagine that these fatigues are not without their pleasures, and these dangers not without their charms.'

So wrote Ramond de Carbonnieres in 1789. This French lawyer and politician, regarded by Claire Engel as the first poet of mountaineering, thus set a trend in the literature of the hills by presupposing the enquiring interest of the layman. Almost 200 years later the topic is still not exhausted, and only the resurgent appraisal of ethics challenges as front-runner in topicality amongst the pundits of climbing. There appears to be an obsession, sub-conscious though it may be, which compels mountaineering writers to attempt an explanation of their motives. Perhaps in the early days there was good reason to hide behind a protective barrier of pseudo-scientific idealism to answer the irrational nature of the exercise, but who, in these days of enlightenment, bothers to ask why? Could it be that as climbers we harbour an obscure guilt complex whose airing in print will go some way towards cleansing the soul?

There is no place in a detached definition of mountain climbing for either logic or reasoning. But by the same argument there can be no adequately logical explanation why 22 grown men chase an inflated leather bag of air around a rectangle of grass while 70,000 others shout and throw bottles at them. Who, after all, bothers to question the motives of a footballer, a golf enthusiast, or a Saturday afternoon tennis player?

Over a century ago Crauford Grove put it in a capsule when he said:

- 2) 'Mountaineering . . . is after all a sport and not a duty.'

And sport is by its very definition a diversion, a pastime or recreation and as such requires no justification.

- 3) 'Because it is there!'

was good enough for Mallory, and it ought to be sufficient for us. If we, in our not altogether deferential view of the layman, could accept this token, we could dispense with a considerable amount of philosophizing. Instead, we grovel in egoistic exercises of self-analysis and weave diverting threads of rules by which we play our game, then concoct an elegant series of ethics to protect these unwritten rules in order to elevate our own standards of satisfaction. This, for the digestion of the climbing fraternity, while an image has to be created as a smoke-screen to protect the sport from an appetite of public scrutiny.

It is interesting, then, to examine the motives—or excuses—which successive generations of mountaineers have offered the public ever since man first strove to rise a little higher than the level of the sea. The climber's urge is inspired from many different sources, some complex, others less difficult to unravel, but it would probably be true to say that somewhere under the following headings can be found an answer to Tennyson, who asked:

- 4) 'What pleasure lives in height . . .
In height and cold, the splendour of the hills?'

- 1 The Romantic Appeal
- 2 The Athletic Urge
- 3 The Approach of Self-Analysis
- 4 The Detached Acceptance

IN THE ROMANTIC APPEAL we have perhaps the strongest element, although it may well be hotly denied by the grim-faced hardmen of today. But I contend that there has to be an inclination towards Romance which projects a man to action upon the bitter, rain-greased crags of November, and on to the storm-swept faces of the Alps. And there has to be more depth than shallow sentimentality—which is not necessarily part of the make-up of Romance—to the prose of Irving, Smythe and others.

More than any other symbolic heading, the Romantic Appeal encompasses all but the most nihilistic of performers. Under its broad umbrella shelter, too, sub-motivations of mysticism, religion and spirituality.

Frank Smythe was one of mountaineering's more prolific writers whose output contains many rich passages of Romantic inspiration:

- 5) 'The charm of mountain-climbing lies not in the climbing . . . but in the great range of emotions provoked.'

His books told more than physical details of routes or descriptions of scenery, they ran the whole gamut of emotional experience and translated the sport into mystical outings.

- 6) 'He who finds beauty on a hill finds also an answer to a thousand questions.'

But what this answer is, or indeed, what the questions are, have been left to the reader's imagination and experience. Hugh Merrick, an author in his own right as well as a noted translator of mountain books from the continent, has a wealth of background knowledge.

- 7) 'There are those for whom their mountain days . . . are profound mystical experiences.'

He then hinted at something the compulsive climber knows well, but seldom acknowledges.

- 8) 'The true mountain-lover need never to have set foot on the rock, snow or ice of a recognized climb; but . . . once he has succumbed to the spell of the mountains, time cannot wither nor custom stale their infinite variety.'

Coleridge was no mountaineer, but he felt the power of the mountains and linked it with religious presence.

- 9) 'Who *would* be, who *could* be an Atheist in this valley of wonders!'

Leslie Stephen, no atheist, but a former Anglican priest, found compensation for his agnosticism in the mountains. In one of the best books of the period (late 19th Century) he confessed, if a little tongue-in-cheek:

- 10) 'If I were to invent a new idolatry, I should prostrate myself . . . before one of those mighty masses . . . to which . . . it is impossible not to attribute some shadowy personality.'

The Romance of the high places affects men in different ways. On reaching the summit of the Jungfrau in 1841, Edouard Desor was struck by the imposing nature

of the 'unique landscape'.

- 11) 'I hastened towards Agassiz, for I rather dreaded that such an overwhelming emotion would deprive me of my usual composure and I needed to feel the grasp of a friend's hand . . . I think we should both have wept, had we not felt shy.'

Climbers have been shaking hands on hard-won summits ever since.

In his book, *The Romance of Mountaineering*, R. L. G. Irving explained that he had found

- 12) 'an influence more purifying than danger in the beauty of the snows and . . . ridges . . . of the Alps.'

And Mallory admitted that his life and thought had been moulded by

- 13) 'the snows of the Theodule (which) roused a passion within me.'

Those moderns who would fight shy of Romantic involvement on the grounds of their manliness could not deny the considerable achievements of some of their more open-hearted predecessors.

THE ATHLETIC URGE acknowledges the sport's dangers and hardships and responds to the physical challenge. It is not easy for the layman to stomach this, as witness the outcry from *The Times* after the Matterhorn tragedy of 1865.

- 14) 'What right has he (the mountaineer) to throw away the gift of life and ten thousand golden opportunities in an emulation which he only shares with skylarks, apes and squirrels?'

Rébuffat, in his manual of technique, *On Snow and Rock*, makes an obvious statement which acts as a counter-argument:

- 15) 'It is right that man should make demands of himself, there is little satisfaction in the kind of peace which is nothing more than an absence of life.'

The Athletic Urge is an important one which calls into play the skills determined by ambition. It incorporates the desire of discovery on new routes and has been responsible for an evolution of artificial aids by which the climber can raise the limits of his involvement. How confusing this all is upon analysis! If a man has his sights on the summit of a given mountain, there can, more often than not, be found a reasonably safe, straightforward way to attain it. All that is required is a sound pair of legs and a steady set of lungs. But the climber studies his peak to evaluate the most difficult line of ascent. Having thus chosen a route with the greatest number of obstacles, and the highest degree of challenge, he then employs engineering skill to reduce the amount of difficulties and dangers of his climb.

This, then, is the adventure of the hills, the moving through the landscape of the earth's last wildernesses—be they only a few hundred or so vertical feet above the sea, or in the far distant ranges. Mummery, again:

- 16) 'The true mountaineer is a wanderer . . . a man who loves to be where no human being has been before, who delights in gripping rocks that have previously never felt the touch of human fingers, or in hewing his way up ice-filled gullies whose grim shadows have been sacred to the mists and avalanches since "Earth rose out of chaos".'

The 19th-century Swiss, Eugene Rambert, saw the mountains as the answer to man's need to escape the tedium of civilization.

- 17) 'The mountaineer is basically a man who loves adventure and for whom modern

society and its way of life are nothing but a prison.'

However, in escaping society's clutches, the mountaineer sometimes finds himself imprisoned by the very environment he chooses and has a far more desperate escape to accomplish. In the overcoming of such hazards lies a certain sense of achievement as outlined by Rébuffat in concluding his account of an ascent of the Eigerwand in traditionally hostile conditions:

- 18) 'It seems to me that the Eiger, climbed in good weather, would have been a lesser achievement . . . throughout this ascent, this snow and this storm, we had come to recognize . . . a great sense of fulfilment.'

The Athletic Urge has a physical response which leads to exploits of ever greater difficulty, but that late master of the vertical, Lionel Terray, was aware that

- 19) 'A great ascent is more than the sum of its severe pitches'

and the experience of the heights is coloured by more than athletic abilities. The urge is there in all of us; the unsettling demand to spring into action as if to test not only one's physical capacity, but also the very reasons for existence. Which brings us neatly to category number 3.

THE APPROACH OF SELF-ANALYSIS in which the mountaineer finds that close acquaintance with—in Ruskin's words—

- 20) 'the dark, eternal tapestries of the hills.'

together with the inevitable challenge to his physical and mental make-up, open wide the doors to a deeper understanding of Self. John Hunt hinted at this in his foreword to *The Book of Modern Mountaineering*:

- 21) 'Climbing is a humbling experience—it makes you feel small.'

which is one way of saying that the activity, as such, compels thoughts which are perhaps denied us in other environments. Mummery, too, found that the climber

- 22) 'gains a knowledge of himself . . . and an outlet as no other sport affords for the stirring energies of . . . youth.'

There are those for whom the peace and tranquility of a mountain backcloth is ideal for an advancement of meditation and self-assessment while the physical demands of ascent have a cleansing effect on external distractions. One of those soul-searchers whose thoughts found expression in 17 thick volumes of memoirs and itineraries was the Swiss, Paul Montandon, who made the first guideless ascent of the Eiger in 1878.

- 23) 'How closely the silence of nature clings to us insignificant human beings, making us one with eternity!'

And the guide, Christian Klucker, who made his last new route at the age of 74, confessed that mountains

- 24) 'stealed my powers of will and health, and gave me the strength and courage to overcome life's difficulties.'

Speaking personally, but in an attempt to summarize an outlook to which others may well contribute, Eugene Epstein stated:

- 25) 'We climb . . . to put ourselves in a more acceptable relationship with the world around us, to find a new perspective; to learn more about ourselves and the workings of our minds; to give a more profound meaning to what, in the valleys, has become commonplace and banal.'

THE DETACHED ACCEPTANCE allows considerable scope for those whose motives for climbing are sometimes shielded by ambiguous statements, for example:

- 26) 'The lover of mountains must go to the mountains; otherwise he will cease to be a person, for others as well as himself, and he will lose the very joy of life.'

This from Kurt Diemberger, taken from what must arguably be the finest literary autobiography to come from a climber's pen. However, quotations along these lines do little to ease George Meredith's scornful:

- 27) 'Carry your fever to the Alps, you of minds diseased.'

The most amusing of recent mountaineer-writers was the late Tom Patey, who summarized a climber's reasons in an entertaining article entitled 'Apes or Ballerinas?' with just eight words:

- 28) 'Because it is the natural thing to do.'

He went on in typical Patey style to explain that we all have some natural climbing ability which derives from our primitive ancestors, the apes. Eric Shipton put forward a thought-provoking analysis with:

- 29) 'Man is a contradictory creature. Throughout his history he has . . . sought security and plenty; yet . . . he soon becomes restless and discontented. Deep in his nature there is a yearning for the hard and perilous road, for the difficulties and dangers that test his skill and courage . . . Recognizing this, it seems less strange that men climb mountains.'

We have seen then that the mountaineer is inspired by several different—though related—motivations which may, in the same instance, be shades of one. Does it matter? Is any of it important? For the mountaineer, probably not; reasons are for others to speculate.

Georges Grosjean speculated.

- 30) 'The outsider, keeping strictly within all that is rational, can never understand . . . that the mountaineer is driven by motives which defy rational explanation, motives which are quite different from merely being able to say that he has stood on a summit and admired the view.'

In other words, if a man has to ask the question why, he'll never understand.

Quotation sources

- 1 *Travels in the Pyrenees*.
- 2 A paper read to the Alpine Club 1870.
- 3 Answer to query why he wanted to climb Everest.
- 4 *The Princess*.
- 5 *The Mountain Vision*.
- 6 *Ibid*.
- 7 *The Perpetual Hills*.
- 8 *Ibid*.
- 9 letter to *Morning Post* on the 'vale of Chamouni'.
- 10 *The Playground of Europe*.
- 11 Quoted in *Mountaineering in the Alps* by C. A. Engel.

- 12 *The Romance of Mountaineering.*
- 13 *My Climbs in the Alps and Caucasus.*
- 14 *The Times* 1865.
- 15 *On Snow and Rock.*
- 16 *My Climbs in the Alps and Caucasus.*
- 17 Quoted by Georges Grosjean in *The Mountains of Switzerland.*
- 18 *Starlight and Storm.*
- 19 *Mountain Craft* no. 81
- 20 *Modern Painters* vol. 4.
- 21 *The Book of Modern Mountaineering.*
- 22 *My Climbs in the Alps and Caucasus.*
- 23 Quoted by Georges Grosjean in *The Mountains of Switzerland.*
- 24 *Adventures of an Alpine Guide.*
- 25 *Swiss Mountain Magic.*
- 26 *Summits and Secrets.*
- 27 *The Adventures of Harry Richmond.*
- 28 *Mountain* no. 3.
- 29 *Mountain Conquest.*
- 30 *The Mountains of Switzerland.*

8 Detail of the W ridge of Mount Huntington (Photo: Bradford Washburn)

