
Art, Science & Nature

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Elijah Walton: His Life and Work

(Plate 49)

The artistic representation of mountain landscapes is still close to the hearts of all mountain-lovers, just as it has been in the last two centuries. That appreciation can be for an accurate imitation of a contour against the skyline or for the subjective expression of the emotional state that mountains provoke. The horror and thrill of soaring peaks or black abysses has changed to a form of celebration over the years, as interpretation follows the prevailing philosophy of the time. *Conquistadors of the Useless*, the recent exhibition of contemporary art at the Alpine Club, showed just how far down the artistic road self-expression has roamed.

Elijah Walton was an artist whose work was a familiar feature at Alpine Club exhibitions in the late 19th century and whose skill encompassed fine geological accuracy and a supreme Romantic vision. Very little has been written about this Birmingham-born artist¹ who is best known today for his watercolour views of the Alps and his illustrated books. It was the recognition of his representation of the mountains that qualified him for early membership of the Alpine Club. The handwritten entry for February 1863 in the minutes of the first *Alpine Club Journal*² cites Walton's election as a member but makes no note of his qualification. However, the point is recorded in *The Alpine Club Register*³ which clarifies that he was the first member to qualify purely on artistic grounds. Edward William Cooke, RA, preceded him in 1859, qualifying on both his mountaineering and artistic skills, and George Barnard's election on artistic grounds followed Walton in December 1863. From its early days the precedent was set to open membership of the Club beyond those with high qualifications in the sport to those judged 'to have made significant contributions to mountain science, and literature and art'.⁴ Walton was the first of many eminent figures included in the *Register*, such as Mathew Arnold, Theodore Duret, and John Ruskin.

Walton's friendships with two founder members and later presidents of the Alpine Club, William Mathews (1828-1901)⁵ and the Reverend T G Bonney FGS (1833-1923),⁶ were of great relevance to and of enormous personal influence on Walton's artistic career. Their combined passions for the mountains, love of nature, and scientific and spiritual backgrounds reflected Ruskin's ideals and neatly dovetailed with Walton's artistic nature. His friendship with Mathews was indeed fortunate, for besides turning his attention to the Alps for subject matter⁷ he also introduced Walton to the

Reverend Bonney, resulting in their lifelong friendship and successful artistic and literary collaboration. Mathews' love of the Alps and his natural climbing ability had led to his idea for the formation of the Alpine Club in 1857. He wrote of 'an Alpine Club, the members of which might dine together once a year, say in London, and give each other what information they could'.⁸ As an amateur painter himself, he was naturally interested in channelling Walton's talent and became a principal patron.⁹ Bonney wrote of Walton's change of genre:

... the impulse for this change came from Mr William Mathews, who had employed him to make a drawing of one of his own sketches, and had been so struck with the vigour and originality of treatment, that he urged him to undertake a sketching tour, and offered him a tempting commission.¹⁰

In a period when the exploration of the Alps provided fresh inspiration for artists and a popular destination for the newly enfranchised middle-class tourists, Walton's change of subject matter from his early stilted Victorian scenes to Alpine landscapes held a contemporary relevance and was eagerly received.

The Rev T G Bonney, who published prolifically, was a fellow of St John's College, Cambridge, a Doctor of Science and a practising clergyman at different times in his career.¹¹ There is no doubt as to his standing as an eminent and learned member of society, and Walton later referred to him as 'my learned friend'.¹² Bonney combined his formidable career with his love of nature and the Alps. He often wrote of the numerous excursions to the Alps that the three friends shared, where Walton was often left to sketch in lower regions whilst he and Mathews continued with their high level climbs. Of an ascent of the Grivola from Cogne in August 1862 with William Mathews, Bonney wrote: 'We reached the arête of the Poussets at 2.45pm where we found our artist friend Elijah Walton hard at work upon a sketch of the Grivola.'¹³ It appears that the friendship between the three men was very strong and that the combination of their talents was of mutual benefit. The texts that Bonney wrote for seven of Walton's ten illustrated books give a clear indication of their shared interests which were representative of the empirical mood of culture and society in mid-19th century Britain.

Mathews's patronage allowed Walton a continuity of support from his initial and unknown patroness who had funded his education from the age of eight at the Birmingham Art School and at the Royal Academy.¹⁴ Following his marriage to Mary Neale in 1860, Walton combined his honeymoon with a painting excursion abroad and was totally inspired by the transcendental beauty of the Alps and the light and culture of the Middle East. His painting style altered dramatically and it is clear that the benefits of patronage enjoyed by Walton were instrumental in enabling him to embrace a wider world and develop his artistic and social aspirations.

Walton was born into a working-class family in Bromsgrove in November 1832, and died insolvent in the same town forty-eight years later. His life represented a realisation of the Victorian ethic of the value of work to accomplishment. With his personal qualities of perseverance, determination and aspiration to achieve, he overcame personal tragedy – being twice widowed – and forged his career, embracing the new technologies of photography and chromolithography in the presentation of his work to a wider market. With his illustrated books and paintings inspired by his travels Walton sought to adorn the drawing rooms of the prosperous middle classes. In middle age Walton exhibited pride in his achievement and a spirit of civic philanthropy and altruism by the gift of three paintings to the newly opened Birmingham Art Gallery that was noted in *The Art Journal*:

By the generosity of Mr Elijah Walton who is so well known for his transcripts of alpine scenery ... the gallery has been put in possession of three grand pictures ... We trust Mr. Walton's example will be imitated by others whose early life has been spent in the midland metropolis.¹⁵

Only one painting from the gift remains in the Birmingham Art Gallery. It would appear from the grand scale of this work that Walton painted *Monte Marmorolo, Italy* expressly for this particular public gallery.¹⁶ Later as President of the Bromsgrove School of Art¹⁷ he established the library with gifts of three of his works that he had written specifically with the intention of aiding students of art.¹⁸

Walton appears to have presented himself in a somewhat eccentric idiom and a rare and charming profile of his aesthetic appearance and manner exists in the memoirs of Charlotte, the sister of early AC member Francis Fox Tuckett, whom Walton often visited at the family home.¹⁹ Charlotte provides a visual description of Walton that represents the only known observation of the artist, and as such is worthy of quoting in full:

One of our rather frequent visitors was Elijah Walton the artist whose drawings of Switzerland and Egypt are a joy to many. He had lost his wife in Egypt and was rather lonely and very eccentric. He affected a peculiar dress and ways, wearing his hair in little curls all over his head and a tunic of black velvet, with the sleeves slashed at the shoulders with some very bright colour. Yellow Turkish slippers completed this indoor costume. He liked to make effects and to call out sympathy, would push away his untasted food and when anxious enquiry was made as to the cause, would murmur 'one of my moods'. We soon found the best cure was to take no notice and then the knife and fork were resumed. He used to bring a great portfolio with his season's work and give us the delight of looking through them before they were exhibited to the public. His little ways were very funny but we got to like him very much. He was very short and used to gaze with adoring eyes at my tall sister and say piteously,

'What a pity that you are so tall,' and I remember how he retired into a corner and sulked for a whole evening when a very charming and talkative guest arrived to spend the night.²⁰

Walton's frequent travels inspired him, and his prolific output was aimed at differing levels of the art market. He produced images of the splendours of the Alps and Norway, of the exotic Middle East and closer to home of the Lake District, Scotland, Wales and the Isle of Wight. The democratisation of culture so prevalent in the Victorian period was fuelled by the diminishing costs of printing technologies, and news periodicals and a plethora of exhibition venues fed the appetite for images by the growing middle-class market. Walton catered for this market with his watercolours and oils that ranged in size and price to suit all pockets, frequently exhibiting in the Pall Mall gallery of his publisher W M Thompson and in his own gallery at 4 Westminster Chambers. Catalogues to two of his exhibitions exist and give a rare insight into his marketing strategy.²¹

A review of Walton's work would not be complete without reference to his Egyptian *oeuvre*. He enjoyed a protracted stay in Egypt in 1863-64 and kept a sketch record of his experiences in the Bedouin desert encampment in which he stayed. Many of his drawings and watercolours of almost impressionist Egyptian landscapes, indigenous portraiture in mixed media and studies of the anatomy of the camel are well represented in the archives of the Victoria and Albert Museum.²² Among these sketches is a self-portrait, the only known image of the artist.²³ A work of this *oeuvre* worthy of discussion is a large oil painting held at the Fitzwilliam Museum: *The Tombs of the Sultans' near Cairo, Sunset* (1865), which was given a scathing contemporary review when exhibited at the Summer Exhibition at the Royal Academy.²⁴ Given the vitriolic nature of the committee's view – that the painting was 'fortunately hung in a place of safety over the door, so that should absolute flames burst from the picture, nothing more than the ceiling will be consumed'²⁵ – it is not surprising that Walton preferred to use private exhibition space after this date. However, the review is representative of the criticism directed at the visionary and radical atmospheric effects that Turner had produced, that must have inspired Walton. The work is highly focused and skilfully draws the eye towards the distant tombs that are silhouetted by the setting sun, and the minute observation in the foreground is comparable with Pre-Raphaelite landscapes. The huge scale, emblematic and vibrantly expressive colouration of the setting sun and the cast shadows create a desolate beauty that sets this work apart from the rest of Walton's work up to this date.²⁶

Walton's initial publishing venture *The Camel, Its Anatomy, Proportions and Paces* (1865) is a triumph of his considerable skill and personal dedication to the integrity of artistic and anatomical correctness, equivalent to Edward Lear's in *Illustrations of the Family of Psittacidae* (1830-32). Like Lear, Walton prepared the lithographic stones himself. So compelled was he to study

accurately the anatomy of the camel that he purchased an animal and studied it in life and death. He executed sensitive pencil drawings of many positions of the camel in movement and at rest, indicating the proportions of the body, and also the differing ratios of the distances between the animal's footprints at differing speeds of travel. Walton's drawings show a masterly control of the pencil and their detail and accuracy has been compared by a contemporary,²⁷ and a recent scholar,²⁸ to Stubbs's study of the anatomy of the horse, a century earlier.

Of his seven topographical publications in collaboration with Bonney, *Peaks and Valleys of the Alps* (1867) has become a cornerstone in mountaineering literature. The list of owners of Walton's original paintings (that were reproduced for the chromolithographic plates) clarifies that the core of Walton's patrons for his alpine work were among the small circle that surrounded the founder members of The Alpine Club. *Peaks and Valleys* was Walton's initial literary collaboration with the Rev Bonney, whose accompanying text reveals their deep friendship, Walton's development as an alpine artist and their Ruskinian inspiration. With frequent reference to Volume IV of *Modern Painters*, Bonney praised Ruskin's great understanding of the Alps:

... no one whose writings are known to me understands the Alps better than he. ... If his fourth volume of 'Modern Painters' were more studied, we should have fewer of those caricatures of nature which, now under the names of 'Scenes in the Alps', too often disfigure our Exhibitions.²⁹

Ruskin's proclamation '*Of Mountain Beauty*',³⁰ in which he discourses on the structure and formation of the mountain landscape and its perception by the artist, appears to be Bonney's touchstone in his communication to the reader. Ruskin used the work of Turner as a 'distinguished representative of modern, as opposed to ancient practice',³¹ and it appears that Walton was a disciple of both the Ruskinian principles of truth to nature and Turner's freedom of artistic expression. It was Turner's combination of minute observation and Romantic expression that was Walton's greatest influence. An interesting example of Walton's emulation of Turner is found in an account Bonney wrote of their Norwegian tour of 1869, in which he referred to 'the weird beauty of the scenery', and 'the Turnerian mystery always present'.³² He continued with a description of how, on a squally evening, when he and Walton were aboard a steamer, the heavy storms and cutting wind drove him below the deck:

My companion E Walton, whose enthusiasm for his art renders him proof to most of the minor miseries of life, could not find it in his heart to leave such studies of storm-cloud, sea and mountain, and even succeeded, by propping himself against the funnel, in making some useful pencil sketches.³³

Turner had painted *Snowstorm* (1842), following his visualisation of it while lashed to the mast of the *Ariel*, the unjust criticism of which inspired Ruskin to defend the artist in *Modern Painters*.

A letter to the editor of the *Alpine Journal* by a 'Lover of High Alps', in 1865, reviewed the picturesque view of the Alps represented in current exhibitions. The writer was critical of the representations of Alpine scenery in the Academy and 'the two watercolour galleries'. The author continued:

... if other artists were as truthful in representing nature ... we might shortly hope to find among them a worthy rival to Mr Elijah Walton, whose exquisite drawings [are] now on view at the German Gallery in Bond Street. ... Those ... who desire to see the Alps rendered truthfully and beautifully, should certainly visit this gallery. 'Sunset on the Aiguille and the Glacier de Trient' would amply repay a visit by every lover of the High Alps.³⁴

Glacier de Trient appears as Plate 21 in *Peaks and Valleys of the Alps* and was loaned for chromolithographic reproduction by Francis Fox Tuckett. Walton published a further eight books, writing the text for *Clouds and Their Combinations* (1868) and collaborating with Bonney for *Flowers from the Upper Alps* (1869), *The Coast of Norway* (1871), *Peaks in Pen and Pencil* (1872), *Vignettes Alpine and Eastern* (1873), *The Bernese Oberland* (1874), *Welsh Scenery* (1875) and *English Lake Scenery* (1876).

At this point it is relevant to note Walton's exploits in the Alps beyond those of the artistic kind, notably his achievement in making the first passage of the *Col de Planaval* in 1865, his account of which was published in the *Alpine Journal*.³⁵ Walton described his expedition with the guide Jean Tairraz, and his comments on the view from the col recall Ruskin's exhortation on the 'tone of landscape colour' in *The Mountain Glory*.³⁶

The *Alpine Journal* also published Walton's account of being the first Englishman to enter the *Gouffre du Busserailles* in January 1866.³⁷ The Club's picture collection holds a sketch and hand-drawn map of the caves that Walton made during his visit. This is a valuable record of the early exploration of the area. Another treasure of the picture collection is a magnificent pen-and-ink sketch panorama by Walton entitled *The Chain of Mont Blanc* (1865), which may have influenced the Rev Bonney's illustrations in his *Outline Sketches in the High Alps of Dauphiné*, (1865). The collection also owns *Monte Viso* (1865),³⁸ a watercolour that was formerly owned by William Mathews and was presented to the Alpine Club by Mrs Mathews following his death in 1901.³⁹

Although Walton was well established on the London art circuit throughout the 1870s and continued to exhibit until the last year of his life, it is clear that the art-loving public had seen his most innovative work by this date. They were being offered repetitions of a theme, as a review of new work exhibited at the Burlington Gallery indicated: 'The Nile, the Alps

and the Isle of Wight still furnish themes for his pencil and we need scarcely remind our readers of his delicacy and brilliancy in rendering atmospheric effects.⁴⁰ His critics referred to his repetitive mannerisms and it was these that led eventually to his artistic decline. A new integrity and a truthful representation of the mountains by other artists had developed. A comprehensive review in the *Alpine Journal* of Alpine pictures in the 1879 London exhibitions highly praised George Barnard's *Wengern Alp*, Mr Croft's *A View in the Rosegthal* and *The Matterhorn* and the work of Mons Loppé and Harry Goodwin. The review of Walton's work was scathing: 'Unfortunately there is little new to be said of it. Mr. Walton can paint a brilliant snow-peak or mountain mists better than anyone. But he is content to repeat year after year one or two effects ... and for their sake to neglect all that gives their individual character to the various Alpine regions.'⁴¹

This derogatory review from an establishment that had once praised his work must have been difficult for Walton to accept. However, Bonney's judgement of this repetitious 'devotion to peculiar effects of atmosphere and colour' is attributed to Walton's deliberate isolation from 'the society of fellow workers and from study of their works.'⁴² The following February, in failing health, insolvency forced Walton to sell the entire contents of his home and on 25 August 1880 Walton died of cerebritis – inflammation of the brain – leaving slender provision for his three sons.⁴³ The obituaries were generous in their praise and *The Times* noted how Walton had combined 'in a quite exceptional manner the rigidly technical with the highly artistic.'⁴⁴ And the Rev Bonney himself provided the most comprehensive account of Walton's life in his moving obituary in the *Alpine Journal*.⁴⁵

Following his death Walton's work was frequently shown in AC exhibitions. While the reviews showed great admiration for Walton's work they also acknowledged his decline, with comments like 'he fell under the baleful influence of the chromolithographer.'⁴⁶ Another remarked: 'The studio dreams of later years are altogether inferior.'⁴⁷ An Alpine Club exhibition catalogue noted:

He delighted in atmospheric effects ... drew mountain form with a skill and knowledge that has never been equalled. This merit did not meet the eyes of most critics, who found fault ... with his frequent carelessness in foregrounds and repetitions of a single effect. He was a true artist spoiled by a public, which called for chromolithography.⁴⁸

It seems there were those in the Alpine Club who considered Walton's pragmatic commercialism to blame for the decline of his reputation. Paradoxically, it was the embrace of this medium that had initially enabled Walton to forge his career. Whilst the development of chromolithography had democratised the ownership of art, it appears that in retrospect it was credited with lowering the respectability of art reproductions and for presenting them as being of dubious taste, associated with the lower-middle

classes who could not afford original works. The limitations of the chromolithographic process negated texture and individual brush strokes and presented flat planes of colour that relied on the skill in colour judgement of the lithographer. The process was well utilised for the production of Walton's illustrated books, but the sale of individual plates became associated with cheap commercialism and not representative of his skill as an artist.

Whilst Alpine Club literature has been the source of discredit, a review of the Club's Winter Exhibition of 1901 provides perhaps Walton's ultimate acclaim from this arena:

The Club hall was again well filled in December with a collection of recent works by our Alpine artists. ... But we must admit that if so far we have produced many talents the genius is yet to come. No successor of Turner or even of Elijah Walton has yet appeared on our walls, no one with the power of grasping mountain scenery as a whole, of painting its atmosphere as well as its forms.⁴⁹

There can be no doubt that the friendship and support of Mathews and Bonney allowed Walton to achieve wide contemporary recognition and to play a considerable role in the development of the genre of mountain painting. Surely it was the picture and art-loving public who bought Walton's pictures and illustrated books that were his true judges. His lasting legacy is illustrated in contemporary reviews: 'Elijah Walton, the artist whose drawings of Egypt and Switzerland are a joy to many';⁵⁰ or: 'To picture these grand and mighty summits has been the work of a life. They take the art lover on easy terms into scenery the grandest in nature.'⁵¹

Today Walton's work holds the interest of many lovers of the mountains and collectors of mountaineering history. As the Rotary Club of Aosta has shown, Walton is also remembered in the places that he visited and represented.⁵² While his lesser watercolours appear on the market occasionally, those of the respected peaks of The Alps, and Walton's illustrated books, are infrequently seen. They form a valuable part of museum collections and the collections of many lovers of the high Alps, in Britain, Europe and further afield.

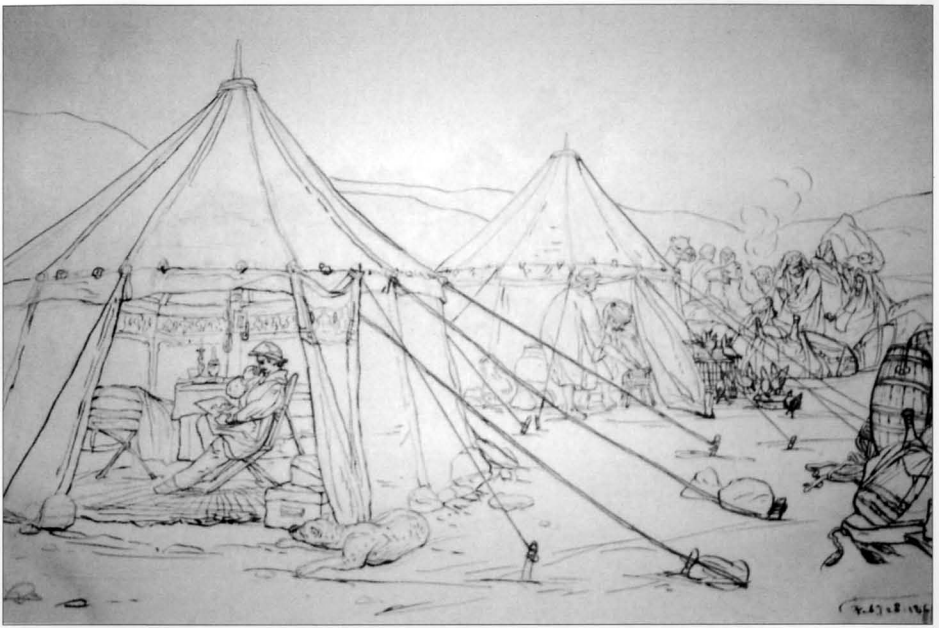
Walton's contribution to the representation of mountain scenery continues to be recognised at the Alpine Club where he retains a unique position for his association with William Mathews and the Rev Bonney. The Club's reproduction of *Monte Viso* as a Christmas card and postcard is testament to this and has kept Walton very much in mind.

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- 9 He owned a large number of Walton's paintings, several of which were presented to the Alpine Club by his widow following his death.
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- 10 T G Bonney, 'In Memoriam, Elijah Walton, FGS' *The Alpine Journal* (November, 1880), p75
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- 23 Victoria and Albert Museum, Pictures, Prints and Drawings Department. Museum no SD1172
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49. Elijah Walton's 'Bedouin Encampment in the Desert with the artist sitting in his tent looking at a sketch' dated 28 February, 1864. (Courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum) (p151)



50. Gabriel Loppé's 'Sunrise on the Grandes Jorasses seen from Mont Blanc', 1869. (Book Review, p350)