

The playground of Europe, 1871 to 1971

(A centenary tribute to Leslie Stephen)

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I started writing this paper with misgiving, for some of you will have read *A Century of Mountaineering*, in which I wrote at some length about Stephen, and which was presented by the Swiss Foundation for Mountain Research to every member of the Alpine Club. Fortunately, most people only retain a vague memory of what they have read. I remember reading an article in an old magazine, all contributions to which were required to be anonymous—an article which seemed vaguely familiar. I handed the magazine to my wife. 'You must read this admirable article', I said. 'I agree with this anonymous author in every point he makes.' My wife glanced at the article. 'Well, you have found at least one person who agrees with you, for you wrote this article.'

The Playground of Europe, which I first read in my early teens still seems to me to be perhaps the best book ever written about mountaineering. Certainly I know nothing in Alpine literature better than Stephen's chapter on 'The Alps in winter'. I read almost everything that Stephen wrote, his literary criticism and his *An Agnostic's Apology* which I found completely convincing.

H. A. L. Fisher, who had married Leslie Stephen's niece, read a paper to an undergraduate club in my rooms at Balliol. He was then the Warden of New College. He noticed a portrait of Leslie Stephen hanging on my walls, and stopped behind after the meeting to talk about Stephen. He seemed, as I learned later, to have been impressed by my knowledge of Stephen's writings, as a result of which he invited me, a few years later, to contribute to 'The Home University Library' a book on the Alps. I was described on the paper cover as Arnold Lunn, M.A. As I had failed to get a degree I was consoled to reflect that though I was not a B.A. of Oxford University I was at least an M.A. of the Home University.

Two biographies of Leslie Stephen have been written, the first published in 1906 was by a great historian and a devoted friend of Stephen's, Frederic W. Maitland, and the second by Noel Gilroy Annan, now Lord Annan, in 1951, a fascinating book more critical than Maitland's biography and for that very reason more convincing in his admiration of what he believed to be admirable in Stephen the man and in Stephen the writer.

Leslie Stephen was born in 1832 and educated at Eton and Trinity Hall, Cambridge. His college offered him a Fellowship, which could only be held by those who took Holy Orders. When Stephen rejected Christianity he resigned his Fellowship. He made his name as a literary critic, as the first editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*, and as a historian of philosophy. His *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* is still consulted by scholars. I found it very helpful when writing a life of John Wesley. But whereas

he never wrote anything which was not both scholarly and competent, the only book of his which seems to me to have the note of genius is *The Playground of Europe*.

It must be difficult for anybody under seventy to appreciate the fantastic contrast between the mental climate of Victorian and Edwardian England and the mental climate of our country today. Most of my elders and contemporaries in my youth were to a greater or lesser degree unconscious Utopians who believed not only that progress was inevitable but also that it was irreversible. 'Progress', wrote that eminent Victorian, Herbert Spencer, 'is not an accident but a necessity. What we call evil and immorality must disappear.' 'The impossibility', wrote Stephen, 'of organising an effectual persecution is now admitted'.

Leslie Stephen's brother was, like Leslie, an agnostic but Sir James Fitzjames Stephen was more realistic in his prediction of the shape of things to come. 'Leslie', writes Lord Annan, 'never countered his brother's main argument that morality would decay if the supernatural Christian sanctions dissolved.' Stephen could never reconcile himself to the fact, to quote Lord Annan, 'that the intellectual revolt against Christianity had been superseded by an ethical revolution far more profound in its consequences', a revolution with which the name of the Bloomsbury circle will always be associated. Of this circle Stephen's daughters, Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell, were leading members. Stephen Spender in his interesting autobiography, *World Within World* summed up

1 *The Schreckhorn and the upper Grindelwald glacier*. Photo: Swiss National Tourist Office.



the Bloomsbury ethos. It was *de fide* in Bloomsbury to regard the French Impressionists as sacrosanct, to be an agnostic and a Liberal with Socialist leanings. 'They were class conscious' and 'tolerant in their attitude to sexual morals'.

Leslie Stephen's children agreed with Bloomsbury in regarding as faintly absurd Stephen's passion for what Lytton Strachey, a Bloomsburian, referred to as 'imbecile mountains'. Strachey, I suspect, had no difficulty in regarding as 'imbecile' any activity which involved risk to life or limb. Raymond Mortimer writes of Stephen as 'substituting long walks for long prayers but as severe as Pusey in his attitude to pleasure.'

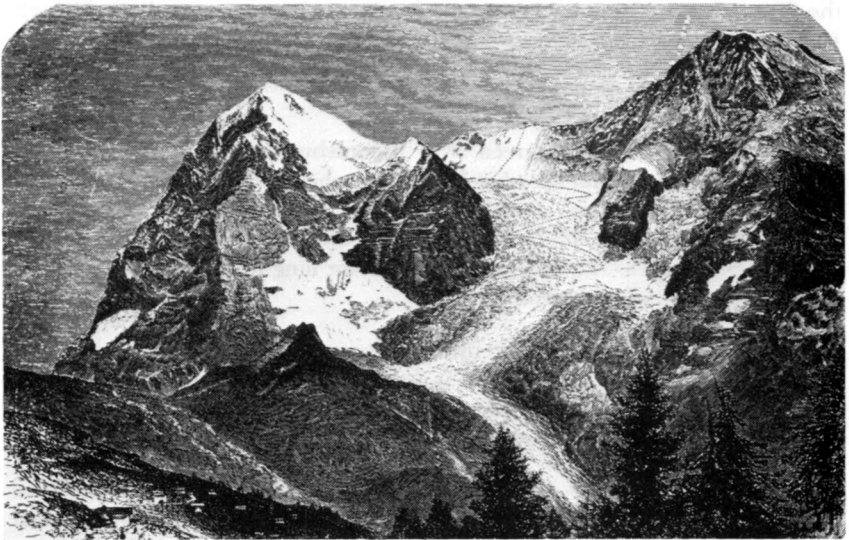
Mr. H. A. L. Fisher gave me an introduction to Virginia Woolf, who kindly asked me to lunch, but as I seemed to her a little callow in my admiration of her father, whom she had satirised as 'Mr. Ramsay' in her novel *To the Lighthouse*, the lunch was not a success.

Leslie Stephen was one of the outstanding pioneers in the Golden Age of mountaineering, his best known first ascents being the Schreckhorn and Zinal Rothorn, and his first traverses of the Eigerjoch and Jungfraujoeh. His genuine modesty and complete integrity emerged in his determination that his role of an amateur should not be exaggerated and due credit should be given to the role of his guides in his own first ascents. 'I utterly repudiate', he wrote, 'the doctrine that Alpine travellers are or ought to be the heroes of Alpine adventures. The true way at least to describe all my Alpine ascents is that Michel or Anderegg or Lauener succeeded in performing a feat requiring skill, strength and courage, the difficulty of which was much increased by the difficulty of taking with him his knapsack and his employer.' This from anybody but Stephen would, as Sir George Trevelyan pointed out, 'have produced a storm of indignation in some quarters, but coming from Leslie Stephen it was received in Alpine Club circles with silent and respectful depression'.

Stephen of course enjoyed the co-operation of first class guides of whom there were none too many. For some first ascents of the period it was the amateurs who deserved the chief credit. Characteristic of Stephen's integrity was the fact that he was the only member of the Alpine Club to protest against Whymper's attack on the Taugwalders.

Personal modesty is often associated with collective conceit, that is with boastful claims for the particular group to which a modest individual happens to belong. Too many members of the Alpine Club acquiesced in the widely held view that the British were the pioneers of mountaineering. Prior to 1850, the only important peak climbed by a Briton was the highest peak of the Wetterhörner, the Mittelhorn, whereas before 1850 the Swiss had made the first ascent of the following, among many other peaks, Dent du Midi, the Velan, the Jungfrau, Finsteraarhorn, Hasli Jungfrau, always known as *the* Wetterhorn, Tödi, Piz Corvatsch and Piz Bernina.

Lord Schuster told me that when he joined the Alpine Club in 1894 the legend was well established that Alfred Wills's ascent of the Wetterhorn in 1854 was



2 *The Eigerjoch* (reproduced from *The Playground of Europe*). The present generation operates somewhat to the left of this line

'the first sporting climb'. The Wetterhorn had already been climbed four, and perhaps five times, and twice by Britons.

'Tall talk', wrote Stephen, 'is luckily an object of suspicion to Englishmen'. Certainly in Stephen's day Englishmen enjoyed 'that tranquil consciousness of effortless superiority' which Asquith considered to be the essence of the Balliol manner, and therefore despised, to quote Kipling, 'such boasting as the heathen use'. Leslie Stephen, incapable of tall talk, was not incapable of tall claims for the Alpine Club. 'It will readily be admitted', wrote Stephen in reference to the engravings in Whymper's *Scrambles amongst the Alps*, 'that if the Alpine Club has done nothing else it has taught us for the first time really to see mountains.'

Whymper only provided 'slight memoranda' for Mahoney's engravings, and Mahoney was *not* a member of the Alpine Club. 'I cannot understand', Sir Martin Conway once remarked to me, 'why Mahoney is only known because of Whymper's *Scrambles*. His "Cannonade on the Matterhorn" is remarkably effective.' That the Alpine Club 'taught us for the first time really to see mountains' is as grotesque a claim as that the British were the pioneers of mountaineering. The great achievement of the British, which I have no desire to minimise, was to popularise mountaineering, to found the first of all Alpine clubs and the first of all Alpine journals.

Stephen was invincibly insular. It never occurred to him, or to most of his British readers, that the many Swiss deservedly proud of their history might resent their country being described as 'The Playground of Europe', the happiest of his titles according to his biographer, Maitland. He was no less insular in implicitly endorsing the tall claims made for Darwin's famous book. Samuel Butler, a convinced evolutionist, had attacked Darwin for his failure

to do justice to the real pioneers of the evolutionary theory, the Frenchmen Lamarck and Buffon, and Stephen was consulted by Darwin, his close friend, in a later controversy with Butler.

Stephen, of course, was not the only member of the Club who, though personally modest, made exaggerated claims for the Club. It is surprising that any mountaineer could believe that members of the Alpine Club differed from other varieties of *homo sapiens* in their desire for recognition. Most men welcome praise which they have fairly earned, and most of the pioneers were ambitious to contribute to mountaineering history, and by no means indifferent to such prestige as important first ascents conferred on them. Stephen was exceptional in belittling his personal contribution to his first ascents. It is therefore surprising that a distinguished climber could comment in the *Alpine Journal* on what he alleged to be the 'characteristic carelessness evident, say, in the narrative of Whymper or Stephen or Freshfield, as to whether they reached a summit at all, and whether or not someone else had reached it before'¹ Whymper, so far from being indifferent as to whether a summit had been previously reached only climbed six Alpine peaks which had been previously climbed.

The title of my paper, suggested to me by Mrs Carleton, the distinguished author who writes, as you all know, under her maiden name, Janet Adam Smith, encourages me to attempt a very brief review of mountaineering and mountain literature since Stephen's day. 'Alpine exploits', wrote Stephen, 'require less physical prowess than any other sport', and it was possible in those days for a climber like Coolidge, who could not have led the easiest route on the Riffelhorn, to achieve fame by his important first ascents. 'You have little idea', a famous Harrow master, John Stogdon remarked to me, 'of the awe with which climbers were regarded in the seventies. The prestige of even a mediocre mountaineer in those days was scarcely less than that of a golf champion today'. But this happy state of affairs was not destined to last. Every new development of mountaineering from guideless climbing, which the Alpine Club condemned in 1870, to *direttissima* climbs, created new standards of mountaineering ability, standards in which the athletic had a distinct advantage over the unathletic and every new development was at first opposed, in part by men who were sincerely concerned for the reputation of mountaineering in general and the Alpine Club in particular, and partly by those who were saddened by the effect of these new developments on their own mountaineering status. John Stogdon told me that he did not care to risk censure by publishing in the *Alpine Journal* any account of his own guideless climbs, among them the Aletschhorn.

My own definition of sport 'the invention of an artificial problem for the fun of solving it', covers both the first ascent of the Eiger, the first ascent of the Eiger Nordwand, the first *direttissima* ascent of the Eiger Nordwand and the first ski descent of the normal summer route by Sylvain Saudan. Our appreciation of such developments will be determined, among other things, by the skill and courage demanded for the mastery of the difficulties involved in the solution of these artificial problems.

¹ *A.J.* 52 175.

My necessarily brief discussion of changes in Alpine literature since *The Playground* was published, is primarily intended to provoke a lively discussion, not only of my premise that Man is a social animal who is, with rare exceptions, greatly influenced by the social and intellectual climate of his day, but also of my conclusion that Alpine writers seldom differ in this respect from other men.

Alpine literature provides interesting evidence of the influence of verbal fashion. Many of the Alpine pioneers, such as Alfred Wills, Hudson, Birkbeck and Elliott, obviously felt that they ran no social risks by using the word 'God' in their interpretation of their adoration of the mountains, and though the actual word 'God' gradually disappeared from Alpine literature, it was apparently quite respectable to discuss that peculiar variety of mysticism associated with the mountains. The mountains, to quote one of many examples, evoked in Tyndall, an agnostic on the plains, a sense of adoration which, as he rightly implied was a form of 'religious feeling'. In general, however, the attempt to construct an Alpine theology without mentioning Theos was responsible for many pages of mere verbiage as for instance, 'Those who are impelled towards the hills seek something finer than the man-made dogmas now crushing and distorting the spiritual teachings of the universe'.

Before submitting for your disapproval the criteria by which I suggest the literary expression of mountain philosophy should be judged, let me begin by an unqualified condemnation of all attempts to censor and restrict the admirable variety of mountain literature. The attempt, as Geoffrey Young pointed out, has often been made to 'condemn any writing which is not technical and impersonal as sentimentality, a superfluous display of emotion'.

The writings of mountain philosophers should, I suggest, be judged by three criteria.

First: Integrity. Is the writer expressing what he believes, unhampered by the tyranny of social or intellectual fashions?

Secondly: Clarity. Can the writer convey clearly what he believes and what he feels? Clarity is consistent with the admission that the mountain philosopher has failed, as Leslie Stephen admitted that he had failed, to solve the problem of the emotions which mountains evoke.

Thirdly: Literary. Is the book or passage quoted well written?

Here are three passages from the mountain literature to which I invite you to apply these three criteria:

My first passage is from Leslie Stephen's *Playground of Europe*.

'If I were to invent a new idolatry, rather a needless task, I should prostrate myself not before bird or beast or ocean, or sun, but before one of those mighty masses to which in spite of all reason it is impossible not to attribute some shadowy personality. Their voice is mystic and has found discordant interpreters; but to me at least it speaks in tones at once more tender and more awe-inspiring than that of any mortal teacher. The loftiest and sweetest strains of Milton or Wordsworth may be more articulate, but they do not lay so forcible a grasp upon my imagination.'



3 *Ascent of the Rothorn* (reproduced from *The Playground of Europe*)

My second passage is from Janet Adam Smith's *Mountain Holidays*.

'I found again that pure shock of joy that is one of the reasons why we climb, but that does not come on every mountain top; when the sudden splendour of the scene and the pleasure of the climb bring a sudden great sigh of elation of fulfilment; when tears might come if it were not that they would complicate one's breathing. It is as impossible to recapture this fine shade of delight as it is to recapture those moments of illumination when we see the meaning and pattern of our lives, but we can remember that we have been blessed.'

My third passage is from Hilaire Belloc's *The Path to Rome*, in which he describes the sudden impact of the Alps as he saw them when he crossed the Jura.

'These the great Alps, seen thus, link one in some way to one's immortality. Let me put it thus: that from the height of the Weissenstein I saw, as it were, my religion. I mean, humility, the fear of death, the terror of height and of distance, the glory of God, the infinite potentiality of reception whence springs that divine thirst of the soul; my aspiration also towards completion and my confidence in the dual destiny. Since I could now see such a wonder and it could work such things in my mind, one day I should be part of it. That is what I felt. That is also which leads some men to climb mountains but not for me, for I am afraid of slipping down.'

'The Alps', said Douglas Freshfield, 'were for Stephen a playground, but they were also a cathedral.' On which Maitland shrewdly commented that nobody worships a cathedral. It is perhaps because the Alps are still the cathedral in which I find it easiest to worship, that the Alpine Club has always been for me something more than a Club. Certainly one of the saddest moments in my long life was when I opened a telegram from my proposer for the Club, that great man and great mountaineer, Captain J. P. Farrar, informing me that I had been blackballed, and few moments have been happier than those which followed the reception of a singularly charming letter from George Finch, President of the Alpine Club, offering me honorary membership. No honour has meant more to me.

I do not think that many octogenarians have had the honour of opening a discussion in this Club, and believe me no octogenarian could be more appreciative of this privilege.