

## Enabling Women: The Influence of the Alpine Environment

Oh the delicious freedom and sense of leisure of those days! .. How we spied grand points of view from rocks above and (having no one to consult, or to keep waiting, or to fidget about us) stormed them with our alpenstocks and scrambled and leaped and laughed and raced as if we were not, girls again but *downright boys!*<sup>1</sup>

This was Frances Havergal exploding with the joy she felt during a walking and climbing holiday with just one other female friend in 1871 - she goes on to declare how she hadn't realised until the previous year what delight there was in 'a pedestrians tour by unprotected females.'<sup>2</sup> This newly found freedom born of her excursions in the mountains were a complete revelation to her. At home, in Britain, Havergal was renowned as a hymn writer, poet and devout Christian – activities more commonly associated with middle-class 'ladies' than wandering around the Alps un-chaperoned. Havergal's experience in the Alps of another way of being, of a life so radically different to the one she led at home was something several women experienced in the mountains from around 1850 onwards. Before discussing the extent of this – its meaning and consequence for the women involved & the effects of that specific environment at a particular moment in time – I first want, briefly, to consider the nature of walking and exploration in Britain for women in the last half of the nineteenth century.

No longer a mode of transport for the upper classes, from the end of the eighteenth century, walking became a leisure activity for this social group. Aided by philosophers, such as Rousseau and romantic poets like Wordsworth, walking grew in popularity. For women, however, there were constraints over where, when and how they walked. For British women of these social classes walking for leisure had its limits; it generally occurred either in the privacy of the garden, a private estate or during bad weather inside the house. In public space women walked in designated promenades or parks accompanied by some form of chaperone.<sup>3</sup>

Mountaineer Leslie Stephen, shows up the gender difference. His group of friends who delighted in long walks called themselves The Sunday Tramps and wandered freely whenever and wherever they wanted. No group of women could entertain either such wide ranging activity or, as importantly, the adoption of such a name. Attached to women this label would have suggested sexual licentiousness rather than a Sunday afternoon rambling group. Women who wandered freely in public were thought 'unladylike,' forward and often 'a particular sort of woman'. Restrictions visited on women clearly concerned sexuality and preservation of male dominance – of keeping women safe and free from molestation, certainly, but also of ensuring women, themselves, did not become promiscuous or too independent. The term a 'man of the world' or 'man of the streets' denoted someone well

travelled, informed, and versed in business; by contrast 'a woman of the streets' or the town was merely a prostitute - such was the double standard.<sup>4</sup> Jane Austen often used walking, albeit in the countryside, to demonstrate and symbolise independence, originality & non-conformance as, for example, when Elizabeth Bennet walked 3 miles alone to nurse her ill sister – an activity which drew condemnation from the socially more elite Bingleys. (At this point, I should stress that constraints on women, of course, were not exclusive to the nineteenth century, restrictions on women in public space go back, via the ancient Greeks, to the Assyrians 11<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> B.C and of course still exist today in several countries.<sup>5</sup>)

Further constraints in the nineteenth century also came from women's clothes which were long, often heavy and restrictive, making brisk or lengthy walks more difficult. Long skirts overlay shorter underskirts and petticoats. Below these were stays, which even if not tightly laced were hot and limited movement. Although from 1860 smaller crinolettes and bustles were popular, Lucy Johnston curator of nineteenth century fashion at the Victoria & Albert Museum, London, maintains these were actually more restrictive than the larger crinolines they replaced.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, footwear was delicate and not well designed for rough ground.

Clearly there were women who either worked within the constraints of dress and society or simply ignored the rules of propriety. Dorothy Wordsworth at the beginning of the nineteenth century, for example, is renowned for her extensive, almost herculean, walks; seventy years later several women were climbing Pillar Rock in the Lake District and many of the women in my research walked in the hills of Britain.<sup>7</sup> The way in which they did this, however, was substantially different to their excursions in the Alps where the terrain and consequent lifestyle resulted in an altered way of being. For most women walking in Britain was limited in quality and quantity; Distances were generally modest as doctors advised against strenuous exercise and most women conformed in their dress and were accompanied by other women, male relatives or family friends on their walks.<sup>8</sup>

### **Women's Alpine excursions**

So what was different about the Alps? The terrain clearly was on a grander scale which demanded, for those who chose to explore them in detail, dispensing with many social niceties. Table 1, below, gives some idea of the highest, most popular mountains women were climbing between 1850 and 1900 and the numbers involved. I do not claim this is an accurate record of all those women who climbed between these dates. Indeed it is highly unlikely that is the case as many women refrained from writing publicly and many relied on others in their party to complete guides fuhrebuche, or put entries into hut records. Nevertheless, drawn, as it is from these sources together with personal diaries, letters, books and Alpine journals it is a close enough number to give a representative picture.

MOUNTAIN	YEAR OF 1 <sup>ST</sup> FEMALE ASCENT	WOMENCLIMBERS 1850-1900
Mont Blanc	1803	77
Monte Rosa	1860	32
Jungfrau	1863	12
Breithorn	?	17
Eiger	1864	6
Wetterhorn	1866	14
Lyskamm	1868	10
Matterhorn	1871	24
Zinal Rothorn	1873	12
Weissmies	1876	10

TABLE 1. Some of the most popular summits and approximate numbers of women climbers.

These are some of the most popular mountains women climbed, but my research has shown around 60 peaks to be regular targets – often the same that attract people now. They stretched from the Mont Blanc massif in the west to the Italian Dolomites in the east. Many women were less focussed on summits but enjoyed high passes, several of which were glaciated and demanding in their own right, linking one valley or village with another. The ‘haute route’ from Zermat to Chamonix was popular as was going from the Bernese Oberland into the Valais or excursions in and around the Engadine. These commonly involved long days of twelve hours or more and some as much as 18-20. Nearly all involved 1-2000 metres of ascent and descent.<sup>9</sup>

Whether they were amongst the almost 100 women who attempted peaks over 4000 metres or restricted themselves to lower level walking this different environment, that demanded much of them both physically and mentally, enabled them to experience a different way of being and it is to that I now turn.

### **The Body in the Environment**

It was the relationship of the body with the particular remote Alpine environment that played a crucial role in enabling women to re-evaluate their capabilities and experience a new dimension and freedom to their lives. To understand this more fully the phenomenology of the French philosopher Maurice Merleau- Ponty is helpful,

I experience my own body as the power of adopting certain forms of behaviour and a certain world, and I am given to myself merely as a certain hold upon the world<sup>10</sup>

Here he accurately encapsulates the situation for women climbers in the nineteenth century. It was the knowledge of their bodies that they gained, often unconsciously, by walking and climbing in the Alps that enabled them to adopt ‘certain forms of behaviour.’

Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology views the body and the environment as inseparable. The body does not interact with the world or the world with the body; rather they are one and the same, melded together. Consciousness or subjectivity, the physical body and the world

are indivisible - anything less is Cartesian dualism. Woven into this is the notion that freedom is never absolute but always relative to external constraints. If there is nothing to be free from then freedom cannot be defined and so ceases to exist. The body, by responding to the differing limitations any environment presents, is vital in creating or proscribing freedom.<sup>11</sup> He gave the example of a rock deemed unclimbable.<sup>12</sup>

It is clear that, one and the same project being given, one rock will appear as an obstacle, and another, being more negotiable, as a means.<sup>13</sup>

Whether a rock is an obstruction, or an aid to climbing, hinges on the body's physical and mental capability within that environment; for some people both rocks would be barriers, for others neither would present a problem. The body, therefore, both defines and provides the solution to the obstruction and in doing so creates or denies freedom.

The inseparability of the body and the environment is clearly intrinsic to mountaineering; they both reflect the character of the other. The changing nature and gradient of mountainous terrain, the different conditions of snow, ice and rock, the variable weather, the duration of an expedition and camping out all demand corresponding responses from the body. The landscape moulds the body's reaction; this interplay between these two phenomena reveals a truth about both the environment and the person. Descriptions of expeditions hinge on accounts of physicality matched to the terrain, such as the following by Elizabeth Le Blond in 1883 descending from the Col d'Argentiere in winter.

A tiny point projected through the snow. I placed my foot carefully on it. But the next step was almost beyond my reach. My gloves were cast aside. I felt through the snow for something to hold, but only smooth surfaces met my grasp. At last I managed to arrive on the second step. My arm could then be thrust through the snow above. The third step was impossible. Michel...cut me one below in the hard snow. Into it I contrived to drop, a few cuts on my hands remaining as souvenirs of my passage.<sup>14</sup>

This relives the delicate manoeuvring and cool head needed on a steep, icy, slope. It demonstrates how the terrain manipulates the body – stretching, feeling, grasping and then literally inscribing itself in the flesh.

Women's exploration of the Alps, involving activities like Le Blonds, weakened the barrier of the female body built by medical and scientific discourse and given expression by social mores. Whilst the mountains provided moments of revelation for men, for women it was more pronounced. This was a time when female bodies were constrained, pathologised, argued over, politicised and made central to debates over education, independence and representation. Mountaineering exposed the foundations of many of these as myths and allowed women to see themselves from a new perspective, often for the first time.

Merleau-Ponty's constraints that defined freedom – women's supposed physical limitation,

society's restrictions and the landscape's topography – were being overcome. Many women were surprised at their newly found abilities. Havergal warned women against comparing what they could do at home with what they might achieve in the mountains. Sophia Holworthy was amazed she could 'walk twice as much as in England.'<sup>15</sup>

It was in the remoter landscapes above the tree line and away from villages where women experienced the greatest difference to their lives at home. Here, gender was less important than the physical and mental ability to deal with the terrain – a practical demonstration of Merleau-Ponty's melding of the body with the environment. Skirts were shortened or removed completely, corsets abandoned. Women became members of a team responsible for, and relying on, each other. Nights were often spent all together both men and women, frequently in basic, flea infested, huts or under the stars. Food and drink was shared and often ran low. For some women, such as Emily Hornby and Katherine Richardson, the only company were their male guides and porters – no chaperones here.

In this rural environment, so different from life in Britain, the identity of women like Lucy Walker - the first woman on the Matterhorn - was primarily that of a mountaineer and not the archetypal middle-class 'lady' she apparently was at home in Liverpool.<sup>16</sup> As a traveller in the hills, Havergal had a different identity to that of the well-known hymn writer; Hornby and Richardson's place as vicar's daughters was overshadowed by their role as independent climbers. The aristocratic lineage of Frederica Plunket and Elizabeth Le Blond was similarly an irrelevance against their identity as mountaineers. There is a certain familiarity with accounts of Victorian men leading complex, often double, lives. Stevenson's fictional character Jekyll and Hyde is the most extreme and well known. Arthur Munby's secret marriage to the servant girl Hannah Cullwick is a factual example and the dual life led by many men between the world of business and their club on the one hand, and life at home on the other, is well documented.<sup>17</sup> The idea that some women displayed a similar duality in their lives is more unfamiliar yet there is good evidence that many women climbers identified themselves differently depending on their environment.

This stark contrast to normal life, however, was not always welcome. Such a sudden change that removed the fetters of a person's upbringing, where the normal framework and structure no longer existed could, for some women, be disturbing as much as liberating. It was almost as though a support was taken away. The perceptive feminist and frequent visitor to the mountains, Mary Taylor recognised this and understood the experience could be so shocking that for some they could never revisit it.

'Above the pine trees,' she wrote, 'the world is all right. If we do not return again after once being there, it is because we cannot sufficiently realise a state of mind, so different to that of our every-day life.'<sup>18</sup>

Taylor recognised that the discovery of such liberty and release from the strictures of society could be frightening. A life that was so different, where there were no rules or propriety to hide behind might be too self-revealing and difficult to deal with. As Taylor hinted the thoughts it provoked could challenge the acceptance of 'normal' life again.

Psychological rather than physical difficulties, however, were part of the landscape's challenge. Climbing could be frightening; both Elizabeth Le Blond and Gertrude Bell wrote of being terrified on occasions<sup>19</sup>; Emily Hornby and Elizabeth Spence Watson commented on the need for maintaining a clear calm head.<sup>20</sup> Mountaineering often inflicted pain as well as pleasure. Joint strains, frostbite, hunger and exhaustion were not uncommon, neither were, cold, uncomfortable nights high on the hill. Yet, possibly, these factors were paradoxically part of the appeal of this 'other world' that mountaineers embraced. The return to 'the primitive', the leaving aside the trappings of modern life, and experiencing fear, danger, basic physical endeavour and discomfort seemingly had its appeal. Plunket felt 'that which we gain with trouble and effort has more value in our eyes,'<sup>21</sup> and Jane Freshfield in 1860 claimed it 'aid[ed] us to put aside, for a time, the every day cares and too engrossing interests of life.'<sup>22</sup>

Elaine Freedgood's study of risk and the Victorians supports both this and the importance of Merleau Ponty's notion of embodiment. She maintains the rigours of mountaineering afforded people a reconnection with their bodies.<sup>23</sup> Industrial capitalism had led the middle class into less physical roles; sedentary, managerial jobs in universities, law courts, schools and businesses for men, and domestic and charity work for women. For some people such safe, physically undemanding, closeted lives became boring, even cloying after a while. By contrast, climbing reinvigorated them; it made life feel more real, gave it definition, flavour, depth. It revealed a new dimension to the self. Leslie Stephen felt it provided 'escape from ourselves and our neighbours' to somewhere that was 'not undergoing the wearisome nature of civilisation.'<sup>24</sup> Holworthy agreed pitying those who could not 'endure a few privations and roughings now and then.'<sup>25</sup>

The ability of women to perform, to survive, to succeed in that landscape and to savour a real enjoyment in that success fostered a greater self-confidence. Records show the mountains women attempted became progressively more challenging with each successful season. Anna and Ellen Pigeon's serious climbing, for example, only began after their inadvertent descent of the supposedly impassable Sesia Joch. Previously they had spent five years on lower more approachable targets.<sup>26</sup> Several women keenly felt the competition to be first even though this was a supposedly male preserve. Walker, Meta Brevoort, Hornby, Elizabeth Jackson, the Pigeon sisters and Richardson all at some time revelled in their unprecedented achievement.<sup>27</sup> Le Blond candidly admitted that part of the enjoyment of making a first ascent was 'to deprive somebody else of it.'<sup>28</sup> The intimate connection with the rural Alpine landscape shaped and changed the psyche as much, if not more, than the soma. Confidence made the challenge of the unknown exciting rather than frightening.<sup>29</sup>

The desire to tackle another summit, or a more difficult route, to savour again that feeling of having won through could be overwhelming. Mountaineer, Grace Hirst, noted

There is something delightful in....possessing strength and power and endurance which enables one to encounter and surmount difficulties calling for considerable force.<sup>30</sup>

The mountains could be demanding and challenging but they also enabled a sense of calm, tranquillity and other worldliness, which encouraged self-examination. 'The silence, the freedom, the solitude of the great mountain regions have such a soothing effect on the mind,<sup>31</sup> proclaimed Frederica Plunket. Others 'felt somehow nearer heaven, further from earth, with all its small worries and vexations, its little meannesses, its sins and sorrows.'<sup>32</sup> Here again there was a lifting away from normal life and a recognition of the different perspectives that presented themselves above the tree line.

The unique rural alpine terrain allowed women to express and discover a new dimension to their femininity; one that was not determined by the rules of a patriarchal society but by the landscape and their bodies' reaction within it. It was a femininity that embraced autonomy, physical fitness, teamwork & dispensed with excessive gentility or refinement. There was a distinct, qualitative difference to women's behaviour, experience and life in the Alps compared to that at home. Virginia Woolf wrote of the confining oppression of one's own identity – of how difficult it is to shake off inheritance and change expectations . In the unique Alpine environment, many women found this became easier. As Grace Hirst proclaimed after climbing Mont Blanc, there was 'a buoyancy, a sense of freedom, an exhilaration in the atmosphere at those heights.'<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> J. Miriam Crane, *Swiss Letters and Alpine Poems* (London: Bibliolife, 1881), p. 169.

<sup>2</sup> Crane, p. 164.

<sup>3</sup> for more detail on the general history of walking, see Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust. A History of Walking* (London: Verso, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> for detailed analysis of street walking & prostitution, see Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (London: Virago, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Mark Wiggins, 'Untitled: The Housing of Gender', in *Sexuality and Space*, ed. by Beatriz Colomina (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> Lucy Johnston, 'Crinolines, Crinolettes, Bustles & Corsets from 1860-1880', *V & A* <<http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/c/crinolines-crinolettes-bustles-corsets-1860-1880/>> [accessed 2 July 2013].

<sup>7</sup> William Knight, ed., *Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth* (London: Macmillan, 1904), I, pp. 29–139; James Jackson, *A Series of Letters Written by the Rev. James Jackson, of Sandwith, Whitehaven, to Mr. George Seatree and Others, Describing His Wonderful Octogenarian Mountaineering and Climbin Exploits in Cumberland, 1874-1878* (Penrith : R. Scott, 1906), pp. 7, 12–13 <<http://archive.org/details/seriesoflettersw00jackiala>> [accessed 24 July 2013].

<sup>8</sup> Edward John Tilt, *On the Preservation of the Health of Women at the Critical Periods of Life* (London, 1851); James Cantlie, 'The Influence of Exercise on Health', in *The Book of Health* (London: Cassell, 1883); editor, 'Exercise for Girls', *British Medical Journal*, 1 (1884), 574.

<sup>9</sup> The following give an idea of popular itineraries Emily Hornby, *Mountaineering Records* (Liverpool: J A Thompson & Co Ltd, 1907); Crane; Mrs Henry Freshfield, *Alpine Byways or Light Leaves Gathered in 1859 and*

1860 by a Lady (S.l.: Longman, 1861); Frederica Louisa Edith Plunket, *Here and There Among the Alps* (London, 1875); Sophia Matilda Holworthy, *Alpine Scrambles and Classic Rambles: A Gipsy Tour in Search of Summer Snow and Winter Sun ... By the Author of 'Scylla and Charybdis' [i.e. Sophia Matilda Holworthy], Etc* (London: J. Nisbet & Co, 1885); Elizabeth Spence Watson, 'Journal of Elizabeth Spence- Watson' (private ownership, 1865); Ellen Pigeon, *Peaks and Passes* (The Alpine Club, 1885); Arnold Louis Mumm, *The Alpine Club Register, 1857-1890*, 3 vols. (London: Edward Arnold, 1923).

<sup>10</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 1976), pp. 353–4.

<sup>11</sup> Eric Matthews, *The Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty* (Chesham: Acumen, 2002), p. 21.

<sup>12</sup> Matthews, p. 96.

<sup>13</sup> Merleau-Ponty, p. 439.

<sup>14</sup> Aubrey Le Blond, *The High Alps in Winter; or, Mountaineering in Search of Health. [With Plates, Including a Portrait, and Maps.]* (London, 1883), p. 86.

<sup>15</sup> Crane, p. 125; Holworthy, p. 42.

<sup>16</sup> Frederick Gardiner, 'In Memoriam. Miss Lucy Walker', *The Alpine Journal*, 214 (1917), 97–102.

<sup>17</sup> Martin Francis, 'The Domestication of the Male? Recent Research on Nineteenth & Twentieth- Century British Masculinity', *Historical Journal*, 45 (2002), 637–652; John Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2007); Michael Roper and John Tosh, eds., *Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain Since 1800* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 44–73.

<sup>18</sup> Five Ladies, *Swiss Notes* (Low Bentham: Peter Marshall, 2003), p. 103.

<sup>19</sup> Gertrude Bell, 'Lyskamm and Moonte Rosa', *The Alpine Journal*, 41 (1929), 278–281; Le Blond, p. 159;

Gertrude Bell, *The Letters of Gertrude Bell*, 2 vols. (London: Ernest Benn, 1927), pp. 51–54, 140–143.

<sup>20</sup> Hornby, p. 20; Spence Watson July 3rd 1864.

<sup>21</sup> Plunket, p. 179.

<sup>22</sup> Freshfield, p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> Elaine Freedgood, *Victorian Writing About Risk : Imagining a Safe England in a Dangerous World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 120–121.

<sup>24</sup> Leslie Stephen, *The Playground of Europe* (London: Longman, 1904), p. 68.

<sup>25</sup> Holworthy, p. 50.

<sup>26</sup> Pigeon.

<sup>27</sup> Mary Paillon, 'Les Femmes Alpinistes. Miss Brevoort', *Annuaire de Club Alpin Francais*, 26 (1899), 273–296;

Mary Paillon, 'Miss K Richardson', *La Montagne.*, ed. by Alpin Français (PARIS) Paillon, 23 (1927), 326–323;

Katherine Richardson, 'Letter to William Coolidge', 5 October 1889, 2009.10, 2,4,5 William Coolidge Papers, Zentralbibliothek, Zurich.

<sup>28</sup> Le Blond, p. 21.

<sup>29</sup> Le Blond, p. 41.

<sup>30</sup> Five Ladies, p. 58.

<sup>31</sup> Plunket, pp. 22–23.

<sup>32</sup> Five Ladies, p. 37.

<sup>33</sup> Five Ladies, p. 58.