

Review Essay

“The shadow, or the hope, of the hills”: The Victorian Mountain Experience

Sara Atwood

Ann C. Colley, *Victorians in the Mountains: Sinking the Sublime* (Ashgate 2010), 266 pp., \$99.95, cloth.

Accusing an unsuspecting English audience of having “despised nature” in an 1865 lecture, John Ruskin cited popular disregard for the world’s sacred spaces as chief amongst their sins: “...you have made racecourses of the cathedrals of the earth ... the Alps themselves, which your own poets used to love so reverently, you look upon as soaped poles in a bear-garden, which you set yourselves to climb and slide down again ‘with shrieks of delight’” (18.89-90). *Victorians in the Mountains: Sinking the Sublime* attempts to account for this shift in attitude. Ann C. Colley argues that beginning in mid-century, the concept of the sublime, as defined by Burke and developed by the Romantics, began to fade as mountain landscape – and the Alps in particular – became more accessible. Tourism, encouraged by railway development in the Alpine regions, brought popularization with it and what had once been known to the public primarily through the medium of poets, writers, and artists was now available to all. The mountains also became a site of

competition, as climbers seeking both personal and national glory vied to log first ascents. Ruskin's "cathedrals of the earth" were fast becoming Leslie Stephen's "playground of Europe."¹ As Colley observes, "By the end of the 1800s, the mountains that had once been thought unapproachable, even grimly horrifying, had not only been precisely measured and "conquered" but also institutionalized through maps, guidebooks, and board games" (2). Visitors could easily obtain certificates announcing their successful ascent of Mont Blanc – a canny marketing strategy that lives on today in the slightly altered form of bumper stickers that declare "This car climbed Mt. ____." Colley explores the influences that had combined, by mid-century, to sap – yet never completely efface – the power of the sublime.

A climber herself, Colley brings a refreshing enthusiasm to her subject. She makes good use of primary source material, often for the first time, in the form of tourists' and climbers' diaries and letters, contemporary newspaper articles and illustrations, and Alpine Club reports. These enable her to convey a lively sense of the nineteenth-century Alpine milieu, from the driven, summit-hungry climbers to those sedentary tourists who experienced the thrill of ascent vicariously through hotel telescopes (an early version of the 'sherpa cams' that now allow television audiences to experience the danger and thrills of a Himalayan expedition from the warmth and comfort of their living rooms). Photographs offer the reader a sometimes startling glimpse into nineteenth-century mountaineering. One is particularly struck by what looks by today's standards to be terribly inappropriate kit² – ladies in long skirts and men wearing bowlers – and a seeming fearlessness. In one photo of a group of tourists on the Mer de Glace, a young girl of perhaps eight years old stands on a snowy ridge and stares boldly into the camera, alpenstock in hand, wearing what appears to be nothing more elaborate than her everyday clothes; behind her a man in pants and jacket steps easily over a crevasse, a shawl draped over his arm, which is outstretched to help one of his two long-skirted lady companions navigate the icy terrain. The word *doughty* springs unbidden to mind.

Colley is also familiar with modern studies of the "Victorian mountain experience" (93); in an introduction that serves as a précis of her book, Colley positions *Victorians in the Mountains* as a sequel to Marjorie Hope Nicholson's *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite* (1959). She engages with more recent critics as well, acknowledging a growing scholarly and popular interest in both the cultural and aesthetic aspects of mountaineering.

The book's subtitle, which consciously recalls Pope's *Peri Bathous*, refers to the "sinking" of the sublime "under the weight of consumerism, sportsmanship, ambition, nationalism, and even theories of thermodynamics, as well as under the heavy burden of familiarity and the taint of staleness" (1). This alone would be a good deal to consider, yet Colley sets out to explore not only these varied influences, but the implications of female mountaineering, as well as the response to the Alps of three literary figures: John Ruskin, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and Robert Louis Stevenson. It would be difficult to cover so many complex topics in depth in a single volume and one sometimes wishes that Colley's treatment were more penetrating.

Burke and those creative artists who embraced his understanding of the sublime had set the bar high; the spirituality and awfulness of mountain landscape was an established trope by the nineteenth-century and visitors to the Alps expected to be overcome by the experience. Failure to respond in the appropriately emotional manner led to disappointment and even to feelings of inadequacy. Standing atop an Alpine peak, one was supposed to feel elevated by the power and proximity of the infinite, not fatigued by the climb, stiff from the hotel's lumpy mattress, or irritated with one's fellow climbers. And yet, as Colley observes, tourists' diaries make it clear that "there were many circumstances that either blocked access to the sublime or made it difficult to sustain a resonant moment that would equal the force of a Turner painting or a passage from Shelley" (19). The mundane had a way of intruding itself at the most inconvenient moments. Such a phenomenon is not unique to nineteenth-century Alpine tourists, however, but is rather to be attributed to

human nature, whether seeking the sublime or some more commonplace sensation. Who among us has not at one time or another envisioned the rich rewards of a long-awaited journey, only to find our imaginings perturbed by crowded airports, queues of fellow tourists, overpriced accommodations or just plain headache? Humans have long recognized their propensity to discontent; Montaigne cites Lucretius – “from the very fount of our delights there surges something bitter which gives us distress even among the flowers”³ – and goes on to remark in his own words that “The greatest of our pleasures has an air of groaning and lamentation.”⁴ As Leslie Stephen declared in 1871 “Let him throw the first stone who has never felt his taste for scenery affected by the state of his digestion, and whose love of the beautiful is not in some degree measured by the variation of the barometer” (*Playground* 44). Modern popular philosopher Alain de Botton’s *The Art of Travel* is a book-length consideration of the ways in which memory, anticipation, desire, and disappointment are bound up in the human response to new sights and experiences, including the sublime. Victorian Alpine tourists’ responses to the grandeur surrounding them were undoubtedly affected by the contemporary cultural forces Colley identifies – advertising, accessibility, popularization – but one suspects that for many of them the sublime would have “sunk” without such external assistance.

Colley’s account of these cultural forces is nonetheless compelling and one sees in them not only the seeds of today’s tourist economy, but of mountain tourism in particular. The scorn that the accomplished nineteenth-century climber felt for those who purchased summits by paying guides to haul them upwards persists today in the tension between professional climbers and neophyte ‘clients’ who pay thousands of dollars to join guided ascents. Victorian concerns about the spoliation of the environment effected by Alpine tourism are reflected in reports about worse depredations today, when trash left on the slopes of the highest peak in the world has led many to call Everest “the world’s highest garbage dump.”

Colley also addresses the force of nationalism, which influenced not only the way that climbers and tourists responded to the mountains, but the

way that they spoke of them. It was during the Victorian period that the language of conquest, still used today, came to be applied to the mountains. Mountains were increasingly seen as adversaries to be "conquered," and ascents as battles to be won. As Colley points out, British climbers eagerly participated "in the fantasy of their nation's superiority" (50), racking up summits not only for their own, but for their country's glory.⁵ This led inevitably to the sort of competition between nations that drove the quest for the first summit of Everest, which was fittingly announced by the *Times* on Elizabeth II's Coronation Day in 1953 as a victory for England.⁶

Colley devotes a chapter to female mountaineers, in which she argues that "historians have promoted a somewhat distorted picture of difficulties facing women mountaineers during the nineteenth century" (118). Colley maintains that despite frequent mockery by the popular press and a certain amount of public prejudice, "Ladies on high" were viewed much less negatively than is generally believed. There were also apparently more than a few of them. "Histories tend to ignore the enormous number of women climbers," Colley writes. "If one looks through the Alpine Club's scrapbooks, journals, and letters, and if one reads through the huge number of climbing narratives written by its members as well as by women mountaineers, one uncovers a complicated picture in which the wives, daughters, cousins, aunts, and female friends of the Club's membership were climbing with the very men who were supposedly holding onto the idea that mountains are male territory" (128). After discussing the challenges facing Victorian women climbers – charges of masculinity, immodesty, weakness (physical and mental), and impropriety – Colley introduces readers to a number of women whose accomplishments deserve to be better known. Elizabeth Le Blond, who published books about her climbs and photographed the high Alps as well, is one of these. Some of Le Blond's photographs appear in the text, as well as an eerie photo of Le Blond herself, face entirely obscured by mask and goggles, hat secured to her head by a length of cloth tied under her chin. Nor were the ladies above bickering over summit records. A bitter feud ensued in 1908 when Fanny Bullock Workman's women's

altitude record (6,930 m, set in 1906 at Pinnacle Peak in the Himalaya) was challenged by Annie Smith Peck. Workman settled things by hiring surveyors to measure the Peruvian peak that Smith claimed to have summited, which was found to be significantly lower than her rival's estimate. Workman's record stood until 1934.

The second half of *Victorians in the Mountains*, devoted to "Literary Figures in the Alps," is sometimes less assured than Part I. This is most evident in chapter four, "John Ruskin: Climbing and the Victorian Eye," where serious misunderstandings about Ruskin and his work have led to the proposal of some misconceived theories. The subject of Ruskin and the Alps is large and complex. His attitude towards the mountains that he loved was informed by religion, aesthetics, geology and memory and his writings about and drawings of the Alps reflect these various influences. As Darren Bevin has observed, Ruskin "argued that mountainous landscapes were simultaneously an appropriate source for artistic representation and a clue to spiritual and moral development" (15). Ruskin was able, uniquely, to accommodate both the mystery and materiality of the mountains, sustaining a belief in the spirituality of the mountains driven by his religious upbringing and Romantic heritage, while studying and appreciating their natural history as an accomplished amateur geologist. Ruskin's habit of close observation and analysis, coupled with his concern for imaginative truth, enabled him, in *Modern Painters* IV, to shift easily from technical discussions of mountain form – slaty crystallines, compact coherents, precipices, aiguilles, ledges – to a consideration of the ways in which mountains shape human lives in the famous chapters on "Mountain Gloom" and "Mountain Glory." This comprehensive approach extends to his drawings as well, where careful scientific studies of rocky strata coexist with such visionary compositions as *Lake, Land, and Cloud* (1856). Ruskin described his own "excessive love" of the mountains in *Modern Painters* IV:

For, to myself, mountains are the beginning and the end of all natural scenery; in them, and in the forms of inferior landscape that lead to them, my affections are

wholly bound up; and though I can look with happy admiration at the lowland flowers, and woods, and open skies, the happiness is tranquil and cold, like that of examining detached flowers in a conservatory, or reading a pleasant book; and if the scenery be resolutely level, insisting upon the declaration of its own flatness in all the detail of it, as in Holland, or Lincolnshire, or Central Lombardy, it appears to me like a prison, and I cannot long endure it. But the slightest rise and fall in the road, – a mossy bank at the side of a crag of chalk, with brambles at its brow, overhanging it, – a ripple over three or four stones in the stream by the bridge, – above all, a wild bit of ferny ground under a fir or two, looking as if, possibly, one might see a hill if one got to the other side of the trees, will instantly give me intense delight, because the shadow, or the hope, of the hills, is in them. (6.418)

Given such 'excessive love,' Ruskin was dismayed by the increasing commercialization of the Alps. Surprisingly, Colley does not discuss Ruskin's response to Alpine tourism and competitive mountaineering, although he devoted his Preface to the second edition of *Sesame and Lilies* (1865) entirely to the subject.⁷ Nor does she engage at any length with his drawings or writings about the mountains; although she refers to them, she relies more heavily on diary entries than published writings. This is not to diminish the importance of the diary entries, but it is in the published work that Ruskin most fully expresses his ideas about mountain form and meaning. The absence of close analysis of these means that Colley's study of Ruskin's relationship to the mountains leaves out such crucial influences as religion and geology. Strangely, no reference is made, even in a footnote, to the fact that the title of the book that Colley positions as the forerunner to her own – Marjorie Hope Nicholson's *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory* – is drawn from *Modern Painters* IV, which is itself a key text in any consideration of Ruskin and the Alps.

While it is interesting to find Colley approaching Ruskin as a climber and drawing attention to the physicality of his climbs in the Alps, this emphasis produces misleading conclusions. Colley argues that the hasty, incomplete sketches that Ruskin made in the Alps reflect not only the exertion of climbing, but the pressure to capture a swiftly changing scene. "Each image is unframed," Colley writes, "for here there is no time to think of a boundary" (151). She further suggests that Ruskin's sight in the Alps was not so much "excursive" (as Elizabeth Helsinger describes it)⁸ as subject to the aching limbs, exhilaration, loose footing and physical strain that accompany what were often challenging climbs. Ruskin wasn't drawing at leisure, Colley explains, and so his sketches are related to the physical movement of his body through the landscape. This line of argument, however, ignores the fact that Ruskin's sketches, whether of Alpine peaks and clouds or of other landscapes and buildings, are frequently incomplete. Often this is because they were meant as simple memoranda; in other cases it has to do, as Stephen Wildman observes, with Ruskin's habit "of focusing on a detail... – the minutiae of a specific feature standing for the significance and humanity of the larger work of art" (148) or wider scene. His mature drawings are 'unframed' because (as has been often observed) he was not primarily concerned with making *pictures* but, crucially for Ruskin, using drawing as an aid to vision and understanding. Their often fragmentary nature was not a feature unique to his alpine drawings. Ruskin himself explained his purposes in a letter to his father as early as 1845: "I consider my sketch only as a written note of certain facts, & those I put down in the rudest and clearest way as many as possible" (3.200 fn). Paul Walton, in his extensive discussion of Ruskin's drawings, emphasizes that the central point of Ruskin's teaching of drawing was concerned with finding "ways of making direct studies from nature, not methods of composing pictures" (95).⁹

Some of his most accomplished drawings and watercolors are mere fragments by conventional standards; *The Walls of Lucerne* (1874), one of Ruskin's best-known compositions, derives much of its power from

this lack of finish. The "unconcerned incompleteness" (Wildman 148) of Ruskin's drawings is intentional, not imposed, and is driven by his searching, penetrative vision.¹⁰

Ruskin's vision is central to Colley's argument in this chapter, in which she develops a theory of the "vulnerable eye," to explain the ways in which "his years of climbing in the Alps contributed to a pressing awareness of his own vulnerable vision, and how this consciousness led him to a more complete understanding of the importance, and even the privilege, of imperfection" (155). Colley is certainly right to point out that for Ruskin, "to touch, to observe, and to move one's feet over stones were all part of the act of seeing and comprehending" (155) and to draw the reader's attention to this characteristic way of "seeing and knowing" (155). Ruskin learned through looking and doing, a practice he sought to pass on in his teaching. For the man who famously declared that "To see clearly is poetry, prophecy, and religion, all in one" (5.333), the faculty of sight was essential. Ruskin's life's work was shaped by his keen powers of observation and by an ability to see and grasp the most elusive of details. Yet for Ruskin, the eye was above all a spiritual organ – "intellectual lens and moral retina" (4.36) – seeing clearly meant seeing *rightly*. The "education of sight" (Haslam 153) was central to his teaching from the start and the act of seeing was weighted with moral and spiritual implications; true vision embodied right understanding and apprehended noble truths.

Colley acknowledges the importance of sight for Ruskin as well as his belief in its spirituality. "To see completely," she writes, "is to possess imaginative insight into the mysterious infinity of things" (165). Yet she undercuts this awareness by choosing to emphasize the frailty, rather than the power, of Ruskin's vision. In doing so, Colley focuses on Ruskin's floaters, an optical problem that was often a source of frustration. (Having floaters myself, I can attest to the annoyance that they can cause; it is also true that they are more prominent against a white or light background, such as the pages of a book, or a field of snow.) Ruskin did complain of his eyes and was often anxious about them; as an undergra-

duate he went so far as to wear special tinted glasses to protect them. Ruskin's floaters, and the concern he often felt about his vision, are well recognized by commentators.

Yet Colley places what seems to me to be misplaced emphasis on these irritating floaters, suggesting that "the motes floating before and impeding his field of vision have some relation to Ruskin's sense of the way clouds frequently obstructed, barred, and shadowed his view of the mountain peaks and precipices he was studying" (161). To support this argument, she proposes some unlikely "parallels," claiming, for instance, that in describing enveloping clouds in the Alps as "float[ing] before the eyes in visible particles, like dust," Ruskin was "summoning a vocabulary typically associated with descriptions of motes in the eyes" (161). Further on, she links Ruskin's "observations concerning the cleavages, the shadows, and the horizontal strata that cut across and often hinder a view of a mountain's curves and precipices" to the presence of his floaters. Such claims disregard the fact that Ruskin was intensely interested in cloud formation and geological strata in their own right and wrote extensively on both topics. The descriptions Colley cites as being related to Ruskin's 'impeded vision' are in fact examples of the clarity of his vision and his powers of close analysis. Colley observes, as if it is surprising, that it is "interesting to note here that Ruskin knew of the theory that particles of dust, referred to as motes in the air, helped to form the clouds, the rain, and snow on the mountains" and that they helped to create the beautiful blue of the sky (161). Ruskin's interest in such scientific topics is well known and it is not at all surprising that the man who in his youth had used a cyanometer to measure the blue of the sky should understand by what principle the shade was created. Another problem in this section is Colley's claim that "Ruskin's careful study of clouds is obliged to Constable's watercolor studies" (161) in addition to Turner's work. Though we may wonder at his opinion today, the truth is that Ruskin thought little of Constable's work, declaring in *Modern Painters* that "Constable's manner was good and great, but being unable to draw even a log of wood, much more a trunk of a tree or a stone, he left his

works destitute of substance, mere studies of effect without any expression of specific knowledge; and thus even what is great in them has been productive, I believe, of much injury, in its encouragement of the most superficial qualities of the English school" (3.603). Of Constable's depiction of weather, he memorably declared "it is great-coat weather, and nothing more" (3.191). Moreover, there is no evidence that Ruskin ever saw Constable's cloud studies, which were not widely known at the time, becoming so only much later. Indeed he seems to have had limited acquaintance even with Constable's finished paintings. Ian Fleming-Williams and Leslie Parris have observed that Ruskin seems to have derived most of his knowledge of Constable's work through the mezzotints from Constable's *English Landscape Scenery* that were included in the first edition of C.R. Leslie's *Memoir of the Life of John Constable R.A.* (1843)."¹¹

Arguing that the nature of Ruskin's sight is informed by what she considers his imperfect vision, Colley illustrates her point with a discussion of the well-known passage about Turner's *Pass of Faiddo*, which appears in the chapter "Of Turnerian Topography," in *Modern Painters IV* (1856). In this passage, Ruskin illustrates the exceptional power of the truly imaginative artist by comparing Turner's *Pass of Faiddo* with a topographical record of the scene that he has drawn himself. Colley rightly cites Ruskin's aversion to mere artistic transcription – what he once dismissively described as "Mirror's work, not Man's" (14.237) – but she concludes that Ruskin prefers Turner's version of the scene because it echoes his own flawed vision. The Turner drawing, Colley writes:

admits clouds, mists, patches of obscurity ... Here the eye that understands the anatomy of the scene works with the imperfect, on-the-spot vision that must engage the mists and clouds as they move across the Pass and sculpt the motion of the moment. The topography is brought to life and allowed to admit the frail elements of human sight as well as the vulnerability of the landscape itself.

Ruskin seems to have understood that one needs these clouds or exaggerated motes in the sky – these interferences – to function as elements of mediation. These obstacles lead to and leave room for mystery....” (167)

Now hear how Ruskin interprets the comparison; it is worth quoting at length:

The aim of the great inventive landscape painter must be to give the far higher and deeper truth of mental vision, rather than that of the physical facts, and to reach a representation which, though it may be totally useless to engineers, geographers, and, when tried by rule and measure, totally unlike the place, shall yet be capable of producing on the far away beholder’s mind precisely the impression which the reality would have produced, and putting his heart into the same state in which it would have been, had he verily descended into the valley from the gorges of Airolo. Now observe; if in his attempt to do this the artist does not understand the sacredness of the truth of *Impression*, and supposes that, once quitting hold of his first thought, he may by Philosophy compose something prettier than he saw, and mightier than he felt, it is all over with him. Every such attempt at composition will be utterly abortive, and end in something that is neither true nor fanciful; something geographically useless, and intellectually absurd (6.35-36)

Ruskin uses the *Pass of Faido* comparison to illustrate not the frailty, but the power of true vision. The superiority of Turner’s drawing has nothing to do with omission, motes, or necessary interferences, nor does Ruskin praise it because it is indistinct; he values it because it depicts a scene that has been seen and understood with nobly penetrative vision.

Colley concludes the chapter on Ruskin by connecting his climbing and his feeling for the Alps with his work on Venice. It is true that Ruskin sometimes describes Gothic architecture in the same terms he used to describe the Alps, and an exploration of what he calls, in *The*

Stones of Venice, "this look of mountain brotherhood between the cathedral and the Alp" (10.188), would make for interesting reading. But here again, Colley chooses to focus instead on Ruskin's imperfect vision. We are told that Ruskin viewed Venetian buildings "from the perspective of a climber who had experienced the "roughness of work" and who had suffered severe headaches in the high air.... He looked upon these buildings with the memory of his own vulnerable body: with recollections of his hands that during his climbs had fumbled in the frost, and of his sight that had been blinded by mist and sun" (169). Ruskin's vindication of the Gothic and his defense of its irregular qualities "is also to some degree indebted to the physical experiences of climbing and living with the interferences chronically impeding his sight" (170). His celebration of the Gothic workman, too, she claims, was influenced by "his own vulnerable body and weak eyes" (170). But for Ruskin, vision signifies a great deal more than mere optics: rather, the capacity for noble sight, "clear in gentleness, proud in reverence, and joyful in love," (22.208) is what separates humans from the lower forms of life. In this sense it is at the heart of what it means to be human. As Ruskin explains in *The Eagles Nest* (1872):

You do not see *with* the lens of the eye. You see *through* that, and by means of that, but you see with the soul of the eye.... Sight is an absolutely spiritual phenomenon; accurately, and only, to be so defined; and the 'Let there be light,' is as much, when you understand it, the ordering of intelligence, as the ordering of vision. (22.195)

Colley's arguments, despite gesturing towards the deeper implications of Ruskin's ideas, are ultimately reductive. In her interpretation, Ruskin's powerfully penetrating vision and understanding are bound up with debility and weakness. I do not recognize her Ruskin, nor do I think he would recognize himself. "The main good of my face, as of my life," Ruskin remarks in *Praeterita*, "is in the eyes" (35.281).

In the next chapter, Colley examines "Gerard Manley Hopkins in the Alps" in terms one might have expected to find in a discussion of

Ruskin. Hopkins, she writes, possesses “a sense of the energy of creation in the small as well as the large” (174). This Ruskinian awareness has much to do with the influence upon Hopkins of Ruskin’s work and ideas, which Colley acknowledges, although she does not discuss the affinities between the two in any detail. Instead, she directs the reader’s attention to Hopkins’s interest in science. In order to understand Hopkins’s idiosyncratic vision of the Alps, Colley argues, “it is helpful to consider Hopkins’s reaction ... to contemporary scientific debates about glacial movement” (174), especially as articulated in the work of scientist and climber John Tyndall. Here we have the sort of inquiry that would have strengthened her critique of Ruskin, and on a subject of considerable relevance to his ideas. Among several critics who have studied the Ruskin-Tyndall debate, Francis O’Gorman notes that Ruskin carried on a “protracted, public and one-sided argument with John Tyndall” (45) about the nature of scientific inquiry in general and Tyndall’s theories of glaciation in particular; Colley refers to this debate only briefly. But of course it is true that others beside Ruskin responded to Tyndall, and Colley is interested in the ways in which Hopkins’s and Tyndall’s responses to the Alps both intersect and diverge. She finds some similarities in their perspectives, notably a keenness “to catch or represent the fields of energy that ran beneath the surface and shaped the glaciers’ movements and form” (194), which she attributes to their shared interest in thermodynamics. Colley links Hopkins’s language, somewhat fancifully, to Tyndall’s science, finding in the poet’s “active verbs and participles ... the very pressures and stresses that Tyndall was measuring with his instruments” (194). Elsewhere, she hears “echoes between Tyndall’s and Hopkins’s sensitivity to the drama – and even to the ecstasy” of the mountain experience, although Tyndall “is more physically engaged with the landscape than is Hopkins” (195). Although the comparison between the two men feels somewhat forced at times, Colley’s ultimate aim in making it is to underscore Hopkins’s unconventional response to the Alps, which is marked by unexpected descriptions and inventive metaphors through which he “reintroduced the idea of grandeur and asto-

nishment in a new key" (198). The examples of Hopkins's language that Colley gathers are indeed unusual – glaciers likened to "rows of dog-teeth," clefts to "flesh-cuts," snow to cream. One simile cited by Colley, in which she claims that Hopkins compares "the snow upon [a peak] to a freshly cut lawn" (185) seems particularly strange, until one reads the passage in question (given below Colley's interpretation of it) and realizes that Hopkins has in fact described "fine pleatings of the snow running to or from one another, like the newness of lawn in an alb" (an ecclesiastical vestment), which is something quite different. Hopkins's descriptions of the Alps quoted here, most of which are taken from his journals, are characteristically perceptive and original, if often less graceful than the language of his poetry (one is glad, for instance, that he does not employ metaphors involving "rice, celery, and toothpowder" (196) in his verse). Of course as Colley rightly notes, the less inspired metaphors found in the journals "are devoid of Hopkins's religious perspective, which prompted him to infuse divinity into the domestic" (186).

The penultimate chapter, "Snowbound with Robert Louis Stevenson," acts as a foil to the previous two, for here we are presented with a figure who failed to respond to the allure of the Alps, finding them instead to be "dispiriting and uninspiring" (201). Stevenson's chronic health problems led his doctor to recommend a removal to Davos, where he accordingly spent the winter of 1880 into the spring of 1881. Yet he found his Alpine surroundings oppressive and monotonous and struggled to write in the face of increasing inertia. Colley argues that although Stevenson's negative response to the Alps was due in part to his ill health and discomfort, there was something else involved as well: "Stevenson's response to Davos as well as to other natural settings suggests just how beholden his imagination was to the character of the immediate scenery as well as to the movement of his body through that landscape the topography of his surroundings played an essential role in the mapping of his texts" (202). Stevenson, Colley suggests, needed contrast and change in his environment in order to thrive creatively; as a result, he felt stifled in the enclosed surroundings of Davos. Confined to the moun-

tain, Stevenson “lost the perspective of contrast and change that are necessary for perception, recollection, and narrative” (203). This is an interesting observation and it is certainly true that the absence of familiar markers, such as variable topography or the change of seasons, in an immutable, monotonous landscape or climate has the potential to disrupt physical as well as mental rhythms in those who are particularly attuned to the human connection with the natural world. It appears that Stevenson was not alone in finding Davos oppressive; Colley quotes John Addington Symonds, who complained of “the monotony of the everlasting pine woods” (205 fn). Yet Colley goes on to argue that Stevenson’s dislike of the Alps was linked to his “need to move through a landscape in order to see and represent it” (206). Stevenson, we are told, delighted in open roads and turbulent seas, whereas among the Alps he felt trapped and hemmed in by the surrounding mountains: “There was no route to cut over the field and walk at will. The paths at Davos were all prescribed by others; there were no unexpected nooks and crannies, no outlook” (206-7). Stevenson’s perception and imagination, Colley concludes, were dependent upon the movement of his body through the landscape, which was denied him in the Alps. While this may be true, it seems at odds with Colley’s earlier statements about Ruskin and Hopkins, in which she claims that their love of the Alps was connected with their experience of moving through the Alpine landscape. How is it, one wonders, that Ruskin and Hopkins moved about freely, getting to know the Alpine landscape intimately, while Stevenson was stuck fast? If Stevenson’s response was not largely due to his ill health, as Colley insists, then there must have been other factors involved; it cannot have been the Alps in general that made him so cranky – after all, *Victorians in the Mountains* is primarily directed at demonstrating how much people enjoyed moving about in the Alps. Rather, Stevenson’s negativity must have been influenced by the local conditions at Davos in particular or by the fact that he visited during the winter months, when heavy snows made easy movement difficult. Towards the end of the chapter, Colley concedes that the winter had much to do with Stevenson’s discontent – a

stay at Davos in the mild winter of 1881-82, when the snows were light and the mountains accessible, left him feeling more kindly towards the area. Colley writes that Stevenson could only respond positively to mountains "in the context of a changing landscape" (212) and cites his admiration for (unnamed) mountains he had seen in America in August 1879 and his delight, directly after leaving Davos in the spring of 1881, in the mountains of the Scottish Highlands. Yet it is notable that in both these examples of Stevenson's mountain contentment it is spring or summer, not winter. Stevenson's was certainly a minority view of the Alps. The response to landscape, however – why the everlasting pines oppress some, but leave others elated – is as much the result of individual psychology as cultural influence. Ruskin acknowledges this ineffability when describing his "pure childish love of nature" in *Praeterita*:

In myself, it has always been quite exclusively confined to *wild*, that is to say, wholly natural places, and especially to scenery animated by streams, or by the sea. The sense of the freedom, spontaneous, unpolluted power of nature was essential in it. I enjoyed a lawn, a garden, a daisied field, a quiet pond, as other children do; but by the side of Wandel, or on the downs of Sandgate, or by a Yorkshire stream under a cliff, I was different from other children, that ever I have noticed; but the feeling cannot be described by any of us that have it. Wordsworth's 'haunted me like a passion' is no description of it, for it is not *like*, but *is*, a passion (35.219).

Passion or aversion; the deepest roots of both are often ultimately indefinable.

Victorians in the Mountains concludes with a consideration of early ventures in the Himalaya, which was to become the objective for British mountaineers hungry for new challenges and conquests. The highest mountains in the world, Colley shows, would also offer these climbers a new perspective on the sublime: "The sublime, which had elsewhere diminished and fallen hostage to tourism, commerce, familiarity, social

pressures, and personal vanity or ambition, especially in the Alps, was still available in the Himalaya” (225). These mountains were remote, isolated, stark and forbiddingly beautiful. Mountaineers might begin anew here, in unspoiled virgin territory. Of course the danger, as one female traveler noted in the 1870s, was that these mountains, too, would succumb to the same forces that had tarnished the Alpine experience. As Colley observes, she was right; the high Himalaya is today a magnet for climbers, experienced and otherwise, seeking to pit themselves against the most challenging peaks in the world. The slopes of Everest and its neighbors are littered with trash and the bodies of those who have braved the mountains and lost. The employment of native Sherpa guides continues to generate controversy (they routinely carry more weight up the mountain, set ropes and ladders, and risk their lives to save often inexperienced clients), as does the practice of guiding novice climbers up above the death zone. But there may be an upside. “Perhaps,” Colley writes, “the contemporary public’s outrage about these conditions speaks to a persistent desire for the sublime” (228). What is certain is that modern mountaineering, despite vastly improved equipment, advanced training methods, and a better understanding of sports nutrition and medicine, faces many of the same problems – and on a larger scale – that beset nineteenth-century climbing. It would appear that in sport as in much else, we stand to learn a good deal from the Victorian experience.

Chandler, Arizona

Notes

¹ *The Playground of Europe* is the title of an 1871 book by one-time Alpine Club president Leslie Stephen.

² In a 2007 documentary about George Mallory, Conrad Anker and climbing partner Leo Houlding spent (limited) portions of their ascent of Everest wearing gear that had been specially made to replicate that worn by Mallory and Irvine on their fatal 1924 climb. Unsurprisingly, they found it more than a bit uncomfortable.

³ Montaigne gives the Latin: “medio de fonte leporum/ Surgit amari aliquid, quod in ipsis floribus angat” Lucretius, IV, 1130-31.

⁴ Michel de Montaigne. "We can savour nothing pure." Essay 20. *The Complete Essays*. Tr. M.A. Screech. London: Penguin, 2003. 764-67.

⁵ In a recent article published in *Outside* magazine, Grayson Schaffer contrasts the British and Polish attitudes to climbing, remarking that "Whereas the early Brits climbed for the glory of empire, the Poles seemed to pursue the sport as a release from constant invasion, subjection, and forced deportation. In the 1994 anthology *Heroic Climbs*, Voytek Kurtyka credited the Poles almost masochistic drive to scale mountains in winter to 'centuries of suffering and danger [that] have bred an appreciation for such qualities as fortitude and tenacity.'" Grayson Schaffer, "Partly Crazy With a Chance of Frostbite," *Outside* (May 2011), 30-38.

⁶ Of course Everest's name is itself testament to the nationalistic impulse that governed mountain exploration, having been named after the surveyor Sir George Everest by the Royal Geographical Society in 1865. In Tibet, where the mountain is traditionally known as Chomolungma, it is revered as a powerfully sacred place, to be approached with respect and awe rather than taken by siege.

⁷ Colley mentions this Preface only once, in a footnote to the first chapter of her book, where it is referred to simply as the Preface to *Sesame and Lilies*, without a date. As Ruskin wrote three Prefaces to *Sesame and Lilies* – in 1865, 1871, and 1882 – it is important to distinguish between them.

⁸ See Elizabeth K. Helsinger, *Ruskin and the Art of the Beholder* (Harvard UP, 1982).

⁹ I would like to thank Alan Davis for drawing my attention to Walton's discussion of the subject.

¹⁰ In some cases Ruskin's intentional incompleteness reveals deeply held convictions. In his remarkable *Ruskin on Venice* (Yale UP, 2009), Robert Hewison reveals that the large blank space in an 1845 watercolor of the Ca' d'Oro is connected to Ruskin's aversion to architectural restoration. A contemporary daguerreotype shows that "there is extensive work going on on the façade in the areas left blank by the drawing" (Hewison 101).

¹¹ See Alan Davis, "Misinterpreting Ruskin: New light on the 'dark clue' in the basement of the National Gallery, 1857-58," p. 59, note 22.

A more detailed discussion of Ruskin's views of Constable can be found in Davis's essay, which is included in the present volume.

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