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All By Themselves

The Alpine Club and Guideless Climbing in the Nineteenth Century

Edward Whymper's image of the Chamonix Guides.
(All images: Alpine Club Photo Library)

In the early days of mountaineering it was not done to climb without guides. The superior knowledge and technical capacities of early mountain guides most often surpassed those of amateur mountaineers and hiring guides was the obvious thing to do, as it is for many climbers today. Around the middle of the 19th century this slowly began to change. Examples start appearing of mountaineers setting out to climb without guides. In the 1850s and 1860s this remained a relatively rare phenomenon but from the 1870s onwards guideless climbing become increasingly widespread, first in the eastern Alps, and then across the whole Alps and beyond.

While many mountaineers saw this development as the way forward, the trend was not applauded everywhere. For a long time many influential members of the Alpine Club, together with several mountain guide associations, remained potent adversaries of this new kind of mountaineering, even after it was widely accepted elsewhere. It was a debate that raged within the Club,

as the addresses of successive presidents attest. Why was this? What were the differences between the Alpine Club and other associations[1] and the mountaineering community as a whole? From where did these differences come?

The First Guideless Mountaineers

At the start of modern mountaineering guideless climbing did occur. British examples from these early days include the first guideless ascent of Mont Blanc in 1856 by Kennedy and Hudson, while Tyndall summited Dufourspitze in 1858 and Whymper tried, unsuccessfully, to climb the Matterhorn alone in 1862. The brothers Parker – Alfred, Charles and Sandbach – were the first to reach the summit of the Finsteraarhorn without the use of mountain guides in 1865. The Matterhorn would see a guideless ascent in 1872 from Cust, Cawood and Colgrove.

Yet even though it did occur, guideless climbing, especially amongst British mountaineers, remained rare. Many mountaineers, guides or local people were not happy with such 'heretics'. In 1876 Comyns Tucker, together with Douglas Freshfield, heard his critics ask 'what business had you to try a new peak without guides?'[2] Cust, Cawood and Colgrove left Zermatt for the Matterhorn 'without an encouraging word from anyone, on an enterprise apparently regarded by others of a rash or dubious nature.' The year before, in his book *The Playground of Europe*, Leslie Stephen spoke out against the practice: 'Meanwhile I will only delay my narrative to denounce one other heresy – that, namely, which asserts that guides are a nuisance.' This opposition was mainly based on the feeling that, as Stephen describes it, 'Amongst the greatest of Alpine pleasures is that of learning to appreciate the capacities and cultivate the goodwill of a singularly intelligent and worthy class of men.'

The capacities of local mountain guides were seen as superior to the potential climbing skills of amateur climbers. Up until the Golden Age (1854-65) this was probably true. However, during this period, more and more amateur climbers improved rapidly and started to outgrow many mountain guides. The reasons for this development were, among others, the improved organisation of mountain climbing (i.e. the alpine clubs) and the personal development of many mountaineers, but also the stagnation of the development of mountain guides in Chamonix and elsewhere.[3]

Before we can turn to the question why many mountaineers, guides, or associations were opposed to the practice of guideless climbing, we will take a brief look at why an increasing number of mountaineers actually started to climb without guides; why they felt 'climbing […] is in all cases very incomplete unless it is done without guides.'[4] The reasons given are not to be

1. For instance in France. A Lunn, *A Century of Mountaineering 1857-1957*, London, Allen & Unwin, 1957, p137. *'The guided climber hardly exists for the modernists of the French school, but they make an exception for Young.'*
2. C Tucker, 'The Cima Dela Vezzana', *Alpine Journal*, VII, 1876, p61.
3. K Van Loocke, 'The Shaping of Nineteenth Century Guiding, *Alpine Journal*, 2015, p273-83. The Alpine Club not only influenced the Chamonix mountain guides, they had a considerable influence on the outlook and organisation of Swiss, German, and Austrian mountain guiding. D Freshfield, 'Alpine Notes', *Alpine Journal*, VI, 1874, pp369-72.
4. J Stogdon, 'Random Memories of Some Early Guideless Climbs', *Alpine Journal*, XXX, 1916, p156.

seen as a complete list. On the contrary: every mountaineer has or had their own personal reasons. The reasons provided in this article are based on elements that frequently reoccur in Alpine literature, diaries, letters and so forth.

A first and often reoccurring motivation was, and still is, to attain a sense of freedom; to be able to ascribe the success as well as failure of ascents to one's own responsibility and qualities.[5] By hiring guides, according to A F Mummery, there is 'the absolute certainty with which the day's proceedings are carried out.' Surprises will not be met, and when it comes to memories, 'there is, similarly, infinite delight in recalling all the varying chances of a long and hard fought victory; but the memory of a weary certainty behind two untiring guides, is wholly colourless, and soon fades into the indistinguishable past.'[6] Imagination, creativity, responsibility and intelligence fade away 'under the unimaginative tyranny of any two chance peasants between whom they are advised to suspend the exercise of their own finer faculties and the direction of their very differently constituted frames.' According to G W Young, such mountaineers 'are in no sense mountaineers, and they may never become so, any more than those who cross the Channel in a steamboat are qualifying as sailors.'[7] Only without guides was a mountaineer truly in command of his own movement, was he solely responsible for the success or failure of his enterprise, and were his creativity, intelligence and imagination wholly challenged. This combined with a sense of *Ehrgeiz*[8] – ambition, the search for glory,[9] and especially the wish to attain difficult goals on their own, not aided by mountain guides – persuaded many mountaineers to let go of the aid of mountain guides. This same motivation, often in combination with a powerful need for individual freedom, urges mountaineers not only to climb without guides, but also alone.

There was a second, more pragmatic reason, which hindered the hiring of guides: cost. This socio-economic element was most notably present in the eastern Alps and so the region was responsible for an enormous growth in guideless climbing. German or Austrian working-class rock climbers – of which there were many – did not possess the same financial means to hire

5. Ibid. *'In any case the trade must be learnt under professionals, but the joy of performance, the pleasure of well-applied knowledge and the application of all the delicate arts of the game can never be really felt till a man depends entirely on himself.'* Also W Kirkpatrick, 'Ten Years Without Guides', *Alpine Journal*, XXII, 1905, p549. *'Moreover without guides you can go your own pace. You can halt as long as you like at, and after, yours meals and on top of your mountain. There is a delightful feeling of freedom and independence, and, above all, what you do you do yourself.'* And G Hastings, 'Over Mont Blanc, by the Brenva Route, without Guides', *Alpine Journal*, XVII, 1895, p537. *'One of the many merits of guideless climbing is that you are always free to discard old routes and attempt new ways.'*

6. A Mummery, *My Climbs in the Alps and Caucasus*, London, T Fisher Unwin, 1895, pp92-3.

7. G Young, Mountain Craft, London, Methuen, 1920, p101-2. *'The great public […] cherishes one fixed idea on the subject of climbing – that the guide is a providence who knows and shows and goes the one sacred and impeccable 'path' which every genuine mountain possesses: to go without him is to tempt destruction deliberately; […] The importance of the error is that its persistence permits it to dominate the minds of a large number of men who 'do mountains' every year from hotels. To them, mountaineering means only the traditional route up in the traditional way; and tradition demands the surrender of their intelligence and personal inclinations for a day to the unimaginative tyranny of any two chance peasants between whom they are advised to suspend the exercise of their own finer faculties and the direction of their very differently constituted frames. Their ambition is laudable, but they are in no sense mountaineers, and they may never become so, any more than those who cross the Channel in a steamboat are qualifying as sailors. But they form a considerable portion of those who go among the mountains, and include a large number of those who give the public their experiences. In so far their patronage contributes to confirm and perpetuate the long-lived error.'*

8. P Grupp, *Faszination Berg: Die Geschichte des Alpinismus*, Köln, Böhlau, 2008, p73.

9. This *Ehrgeiz* would influence the so-called 'heroic climbing style' practiced by mostly German and Austrian climbers during the 1930s under national socialism.

Celebrity guides, including Jacob Anderegg (1829-1878). Anderegg, from the Swiss village of Meiringen, is perhaps best known for the first ascent of the Brenva Spur in 1865, an achievement overlooked in the aftermath of the near-contemporaneous Matterhorn disaster. That summer he also made first ascents of the Piz Roseg, the Obergabelhorn and the Pigne d'Arolla.

Franz Andermatten (1823-1883). In his early days he climbed with Curé Imseng and also with Melchior Ulrich with whom, and others, he made the first recorded crossings of the Ried and Adler passes. Among his first ascents were the Strahlhorn, Lagginhorn and the Nadelhorn. In 1872, by then in his late 40s, he was one of the guides on the first ascent of the Zinalrothorn from Zermatt.

mountain guides every time they wanted to climb as their mostly middle-class British counterparts. Yet even the Alpine Club acknowledged the high cost of hiring mountain guides was 'a serious hindrance to mountaineering.'[10] For many mountaineers, hiring a guide was a luxury.[11]

The organisation of mountain guiding was also a factor. For some, guideless climbing was a way – often the only way – to oppose sclerotic rules or traditions hindering the development of mountaineering whether on an individual or wider level. For example, around Chamonix British mountaineers set out on guideless exploits motivated by 'love of adventure, by the hope of breaking through the exclusive Chamounix system.'[12] This Chamonix system blocked many mountaineering innovations during the 1860s

10. F Grove 'Alpine Notes', *Alpine Journal*, VI, 1874, pp430-1.
11. G Young, *On High Hills*, 1927, p39. *'But on many days during the first season in the Val d'Anniviers, I was alone. Because guides were luxuries, and, of still more consequence, it took long to overcome that shyness of mixing with men of a different language and class which weighs heavily upon a type of public-school-bred islander.'*
12. W Longman, *Modern Mountaineering and the History of the Alpine Club*, London, Longman, 1878, p15. *'… the wish to break down the oppressive and mischievous system on which the Chamonix guides were managed, and for this purpose they* [Hudson and Kennedy] *determined to go without guides.'*

Johann Joseph Bennen (1824-1864) was born in Steinhaus and based at Laax in the Conches valley. Not only did he make the first ascent of the Weisshorn with John Tyndall, he made attempts on the Italian ridge of the Matterhorn. Tyndall wrote in his Führerbuch that he bore 'the same relation to the common run of guides as Wellington to an ordinary subaltern.' He died in an avalanche on 28 February 1864 attempting a winter ascent in the Bernese Oberland.

Michel Croz (1828-1865) was born in Le Tour above Chamonix and began his guiding career when William Mathews hired him for an ascent of Mont Blanc. He quickly became one of the most sought-after guides of his era. Whymper wrote after their crossing of the Col de la Pilatte of the 'ability with which Croz led us through a dense mist'. Whymper continued: 'As an exhibition of strength and skill, it has seldom been surpassed in the Alps or elsewhere.'

and 1870s. Under pressure of mountaineers and alpine associations Chamonix would eventually modernise.[13]

Another reason to give up on mountain guides was insufficient expertise. Although mountain guiding improved throughout the 19th century, progress could be held up or even thwarted. Lack of clear rules, growing demand, the absence of training courses or professional organisations all had a serious impact on the qualities of guides. Many guides, especially before the 1870s and 1880s, but also later on,[14] had dubious mountaineering skills. In time, the professionalism of mountain guiding would dramatically improve but in this critical period the dubious skills of guides could persuade some mountaineers to set out on their own.

At the same time, many top alpinists simply outgrew their mountain

13. K Van Loocke, 'The Shaping of Nineteenth Century Guiding', *Alpine Journal*, 2015, p273-83.
14. The Alpine Journal of 1903 includes as causes of accidents that year *'an increase in the quantity and a decrease in the quality of the guides.'* This evolution or feeling may have encouraged some to start climbing without the use of guides, whether they were prepared for it or not. G Yeld (ed), 'Alpine Accidents in 1903', *Alpine Journal*, XXI, 1903, p552.

guides. Many Austrian and German climbers focussed almost exclusively on rock climbing, prompting rapid technical development in the late 19th century. This continuous improvement of rock climbing techniques and the urge to climb ever more difficult routes made climbing with guides more or less obsolete.[15] This reason corresponds to Mummery's explanation of why guideless climbing was more rewarding.[16]

A final reason can be found in the changing relationships between mountain guides and mountaineers. In the early days, mountaineers and guides often teamed up for long periods of time. Spells of several weeks were not exceptional.[17] As a result, the Golden Age is known for its profound relationships between guide and client. From the 1860s and 1870s onwards this changed. Each year, more tourists were coming to the Alps – a commodification of the Alps and mountaineering if you will – and often for shorter periods of time. The strong bond between client and guide that had once been common became increasingly rare. Among skilled mountaineers there was a sense that guides were no longer strong and independent but not much more than servants.

> *'The swarming of the tourist has brought with it the wretched distinctions of class, and the modern guide inhabits the guide's room and sees his Monsieur only when actually on an expedition. Cut off from the intercourse of the old days, the guide tends more and more to belong to the lackey tribe, and the ambitious tourist looks upon him much as his less aspiring brother regards his mule. The constant repetition of the same ascent has, moreover, tended to make the guide into a sort of contractor. For so many tens or hundreds of francs he will take you anywhere you like to name.'* [18]

Mountain guides, according to some, lost their sense of independence, creativity, and even strength. At the same time, many mountaineers must have felt as if 'the skill of the traveller counts for absolutely naught; the practised guide looks on him merely as luggage.' This was all the more reason to

15. C Dent, 'Amateurs and Professional Guides of the Present Day', *Alpine Journal*, XII, 1886, p296. *'On rock mountains many seem to think that a guide's powers so conspicuously excel those of his amateur rival, that even an inferior professional is vastly superior to the best amateur. […] That this is much less the case now than formerly, ascents of the Meije, or the still more notable instance of discovery by amateurs of the right route up the Monte della Disgrazia from the Val Malenco side, sufficiently prove. The latter, indeed, is perhaps the most conspicuous instance of amateurs succeeding where the best of guides had tried and failed.'* C Pilkington, 'Address to the Alpine Club', *Alpine Journal*, XIX, 1899, p297. *'But we are now* [at the end of the 19th century] *faced with the fact that only a few alpine peasants can acquire these qualities, and that the demand for good guides is larger than the supply.'*

16. Even around the 1900s, guides in Chamonix were not always very well qualified, despite being urge to continually improve by the Alpine Club mountaineers and other alpine associations, particularly the Swiss Alpine Club, suggesting problems had not disappeared since the 1860s and 1870s. G Young, *On High Hills*, 1927, p163. *'On my first visit to the Aiguilles, four of us had spent some twenty wicked hours upon the insidious little peak. Misled as to the route by the misstatements of some worser Chamonix guides – from whose threats of maltreatment in the valley I had still, in those distant days, to protect my 'foreigner' Knubel – we had assaulted the great Requin buttress directly up from the Mer de Glace, and so made, unwittingly, a first ascent as difficult as that of the Dru.'* G Young, *On High Hills*, p258. *'It is a matter of experience that good guides are least enterprising in their own valley. The difficult and the unclimbed in their own region are familiar to them as such, traditionally; and the voice of an inferior herd of colleagues, clamorous against any challenge to the tradition, destroys their initiative. As the moment approached for defying the terrors of the east ridge, invested for him from childhood with the superstition of inaccessibility, Laurent, our own local providence, was evidently fighting a losing battle with the genius of valley pessimism.'*

17. A Wills, *Wandering Among The High Alps*, London, Richard Bentley, 1856, p318.

18. A Mummery, *My Climbs in the Alps and Caucasus*, p90-1.

climb without guides.[19]

The truth is that thanks to this growth in tourism mountain guiding actually improved rapidly across the Alps.[20] This period saw the establishment of mountain guiding associations, stricter regulations and training courses for guides. Even so, many skilled mountaineers during the latter half of the 19th and early 20th century were convinced that the increase in tourism had caused a negative effect on the overall qualities of mountain guiding and this perception also drove guideless climbing. But the fact remains that despite the increasing popularity of guideless climbing among the elite, mountain guides remained very important to the bulk of mountaineers. The growth in tourism allowed guides to make improvements and took guiding away from the pioneer scientists and mountaineers of the mid 19th century. At the same time, the rise in standards among elite mountaineers also drove a rise in technical standards among guides.[21]

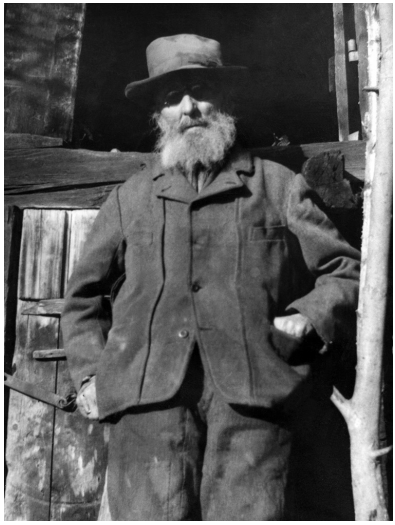
Until the 1860s and early 1870s guides were seen as an absolute necessity among the vast majority of mountaineers. The Alps were scarcely explored and mountaineering techniques were mediocre at best. Mountaineers, with little or no local experience or knowledge had little choice but to entrust themselves to mountain guides[22] if they wanted to climb and explore hitherto untrodden places. Then, as knowledge and access to it improved, that dynamic changed.[23] In the eastern Alps this happened much faster than in the western Alps. In the western Alps, where most British mountaineers were active, the trend of guideless climbing developed at a slower rate. As the socio-economic element was of less importance, most mountaineers kept climbing with mountain guides. This socio-economic element also influenced the point of view of the Alpine Club with regard to guideless climbing.

While some welcomed the change, others did not. It's understandable that mountain guides and their associations were not best pleased, fearing their revenues might decrease and their status be diminished. As it happened, guided mountaineering experienced strong growth, a process that continues, and so guides didn't experience much, or even any, damage to their profession. Perhaps more surprising was the displeasure and even animosity of many British amateur mountaineers at the Alpine Club, where a majority remained opposed to guideless climbing until the late 19th century and even beyond. This opposition is illustrated in the numbers who continued to hire guides but also in the way that guideless climbers felt the need to defend themselves against attacks on the 'folly' of their enterprises.

These advocates were sometimes explicit in arguing that guideless

19. A Mummery, *My Climbs in the Alps and Caucasus*, p90-1.
20. A Hungerbühler, *Könige der Alpen*, 2013. K Van Loocke, 'Geld, Vriendschap en Sociale Tegenstellingen. Een onderzoek naar de paradoxale relaties tussen gidsen en alpinisten in de negentiende eeuw', master's dissertation, P François (supervisor), Ghent University, University of Hertfordshire, 2010, p201.
21. G Young, *On High Hills*, p98-103. *'I was making to train on a young and unspoiled guide.'* Also by associations representing mountaineers: K Van Loocke, 2015.
22. Although at this time mountain guides were mostly herdsmen and farmers who occasionally guided tourists on glaciers or mountain peaks.
23. For the vast majority of mountaineers, meaning tourists, guides remained almost indispensable. The story told here is applicable to elite mountaineers. These may be only a minority, but despite this, elite mountaineers did create and develop the framework wherein all mountaineers were active.

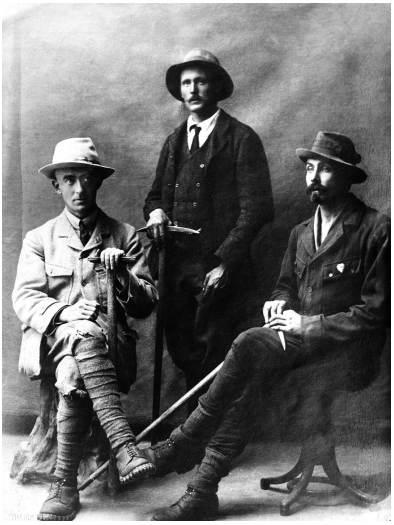
A pack of Knubels. Nicklaus Knubel (1841-1877) from his *carte de visite*. It was Niklaus who led Lucy Walker on the first female ascent of the Matterhorn and then Margaret Breevoort on the first female ascent from the Italian side. He died with his brothers Johann and Peter Joseph, along with their employers Lewis and Paterson, in the terrible Lyskamm tragedy of 1877, when a cornice collapsed underneath them.



Peter Knubel (1832-1919) was the first Swiss guide to climb beyond the Alps, having made the first ascent of Elbrus (5642m) with Frederick Gardiner, Florence Crauford Grove and Horace Walker. He was also on hand to assist in the terrible aftermath of the Lyskamm accident which killed his three brothers. He continued to guide into his 70s on the Matterhorn.

climbing was superior.[24] 'In 1892,' Mummery wrote, 'I once again started for the mountain. This time we were without guides, for we had learnt the great truth that those who wish to really enjoy the pleasures of mountaineering, must roam the upper snows trusting exclusively to their own skill and knowledge.'[25] Mummery had in his early career had a strong relationship with A Burgener but others who espoused the values of guideless climbing could also continue to climb with them, Geoffrey Winthrop Young being a good example. The paradox illustrates I think how guided climbing was part of the Alpine Club's cultural fabric.[26] While British alpinists towards the end of the 19th century did not have to defend themselves as strongly as before for their guideless undertakings,[27] this paradoxical stand remained present.

24. Especially in the second half of the 19th century when guideless climbing increased immensely. 'Alpine Notes', *Alpine Journal*, XXVI, 1912, pp215-6; G Yeld (ed)), 'The Alpine Club Library', *Alpine Journal*, XIII, 1907, p160; p487.
25. A Mummery, *My Climbs in the Alps and Caucasus*, p90.
26. Mountaineers did not always have much choice of climbing partner. Mountain guides offered a solution to this problem and were available for longer periods. Guide and amateur were to some extent bound to each other, seeing each other as partners and companions, rather than being in a straightforward client-guide relationship. Lunn considered Young's association with Knubel *'had far more in common with that which unites members of a guideless party.'* A Lunn, 'Geoffrey Winthrop Young', *Alpine Journal*, 1961, pp100-17.
27. Numerous entries in the *Alpine Journal* of guideless ascents confirm this.



Joseph Knubel (1881-1961) between H O Jones and Geoffrey Winthrop Young in 1911. The son of Peter Knubel, he qualified as a guide in 1904, continuing to work as a stone-mason and lumberjack. Young spotted his abilities as a guide and they climbed together each year between 1906 and the outbreak of war, making some of the most impressive first ascents of the Edwardian area.

Geoffrey Winthrop Young and Joseph Knubel in Zermatt in 1948. Their accomplishments together were legendary: new routes on the Zinalrothorn, the Weisshorn, Lyskamm, the mountain that killed his uncles, and the Täschhorn. Arnold Lunn taught him how to ski and he went on to make groundbreaking ski tours. Young approved of guideless climbing in theory, but it practice enjoyed climbing too much with Knubel to give him up.

The Alpine Club

The Alpine Club was founded by mountaineers accustomed to climbing with guides. Guideless climbing happened, but it was rare. The idea of amateurs tackling the same mountains on their own, let alone by more difficult routes, was unthinkable. Some members wanted the Alpine Club to speak out explicitly 'against mountaineering without guides, a practice I believe to be fraught with danger.'[28] Several of the first generation of British mountaineers feared that 'if ever it becomes fashionable for English travellers to attack the high Alps without guides and without due experience, the era of bad accidents will begin.'[29] This group was more or less convinced that amateurs could not attain the same mountaineering qualities as guides, not least because 'the guide has been practicing during his whole life, the amateur during a few vacations.'[30] Climbing without guides was, in their eyes, not completely impossible – for instance on smaller excursions, when

28. F Grove, 'The Comparative Skill of Travellers and Guides', *Alpine Journal*, V, 1872, p95.
29. L Stephen, 'Alpine Dangers', *Alpine Journal*, II, 1866, p280-1. Or: W Longman, *Modern Mountaineering and the History of the Alpine Club*, 1878, p37. *'… I think* [re: Tyndall] *… if climbing without guides were to become habitual, deplorable consequences would assuredly sooner or later ensue.'*
30. L Stephen, 'Alpine Dangers', *Alpine Journal*, II, 1866, p281.

guides were not available[31], or after years and years of training[32] – but for most it would be altogether risky and reckless.[33] Many of the early British guideless ascents often provoked 'an outburst of indignant criticism.'[34] Within the Alpine Club there was, however, from the beginning a discussion on this matter, even though many did not agree with the trend. A general agreement was found that 'the neglect to take [guides] when the party is not exclusively composed of practised mountaineers, is totally unjustifiable, and calculated to produce the most lamentable results.' Yet, the Alpine Club was convinced that 'it is impossible to give a formal code of rules upon the subject.'[35] Clear and distinct rules on when and when not to take guides on excursions never came into existence, yet warnings regarding the subject of guideless mountaineering appeared regularly in the *Alpine Journal*.

A negative stance on guideless climbing did not only arrive out of cautiousness. It was also caused by the fear of several mountaineers that their achievements might be devalued and they might appear to be second-class mountaineers: 'a standard was being set which was higher than that to which they could attain. […] it was inevitable that those who could not lead a guideless party up a second-class peak would not welcome a development which threatened to divide mountaineers into the guideless élite and a guided proletariat.'[36] While the Alpine Club showed itself to be very progressive during the 1850s and 1860s when they were at the frontline in trying to urge the Compagnie des Guides de Chamonix to let go of their own conservatism and start opening up towards new trends and innovations, after a few decades it was the Alpine Club itself that became conservative and protective of the past.

Finally, this negative point of view was, perhaps often indirectly or subconsciously, based on a romanticised view of mountain guiding. One or more amateurs together with one or more guides were the 'ideal type', to use the terminology of Max Weber,[37] of a mountaineering partnership: *seilschaft* in German. In the 1860s this particular ideal type was its zenith. Travel stories and papers in the *Alpine Journal* often refer to the way amateurs looked up at mountain guides. It was a paradigm the first generation of mostly British amateurs helped construct and offered considerable resistance when people started to climb without guides. Opposition to this ideal

31. J Bryce, 'The Ascent of Ararat', *Alpine Journal*, VIII, 1878, p210. *'I am no disciple of that gospel of mountaineering without guides which Mr. Girdlestone has preached so zealously by example as well as precept. But if there is any justification for the practice, that justification exists when guides are not to be had.'*
32. D Freshfield (ed), 'Proceedings of the Alpine Club', *Alpine Journal*, VIII, 1878, p232: *'Expeditions without guides were, no doubt, highly enjoyable, but were only justifiable when the members of the party had first qualified themselves for the work by the training which all authorities agreed was necessary to make a good mountaineer.'* See also: C Mathews, 'New Experiences in the Old Playground', *Alpine Journal*, XVI, 1893, p22.
33. C Dent, 'Address to the Alpine Club', *Alpine Journal*, XV, 1891, p13: *'The truth is that the number of amateurs really competent to undertake serious expeditions without guides is considerably less than the number who think that they can do so.'*
34. C Mathews, 'The Growth of Mountaineering', *Alpine Journal*, X, 1882, p256.
35. F Grove, 'The Comparative Skill of Travellers and Guides', *Alpine Journal*, V, 1872, p96.
36. A Lunn, *A Century of Mountaineering 1857-1957*, 1957, p86.
37. M Weber, *Methodology of the Social Sciences*, New York, Free Press, 1949. L McFalls, *Max Weber's 'Objectivity' Reconsidered*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2007.

type was perceived as harmful to the image of mountaineering, through a feared increase of accidents. This, of course, was to be prevented. British mountaineering had suffered very public disasters and been the subject of public disapproval. This had sensitised many in the Alpine Club to the prospect of further bad news. Innovation carried with it a threat.

This point of view, so common in the Alpine Club, could be called conservative. While other associations, French, German, Austrian and so on, embraced guideless climbing, the Alpine Club dragged its heels.[38] At the same time, this conservatism doesn't have to be seen as necessarily negative. By constantly informing mountaineers of the possible dangers, the responsibility and experience that is needed, and by being extremely cautious, accidents may well have been prevented. Seen over the long term, we can say that 'even if the Alpine Club tended in the past to overstress caution, this was a fault on the right side.'[39] While in the early days the Alpine Club was more or less opposed to the emergence of guideless climbing, in later years they accepted the new phenomenon, but at the same time maintained a prudent approach. This point of view can be summarized with the words of Frederick Pollock: 'As to climbing without guides, it is a thing neither to be lightly undertaken nor to be indiscriminately condemned.'[40]

This conservatism did not mean that guideless climbs were not acknowledged or guideless climbers were banned or even unwelcome in the Alpine Club.[41] Nevertheless, it was not encouraged and often contested. Until the 1880s, guideless climbers experienced difficulties in being acknowledged by the Alpine Club. They were 'told in a nice (I mean really nice) letter, […] that my conduct was utterly subversive of the highest mountaineering morality and might easily lead silly sheep astray.'[42]

38. A Lunn, *A Century of Mountaineering 1857-1957*, 1957, p137. *'The guided climber hardly exists for the modernists of the French school, but they make an exception for Young.'* While the Alpine Club might have been more reserved towards guideless climbing than other mountaineering associations, this does not mean those associations embraced guideless climbing without any debate. 'Reviews and Notices', *Jahrbuch des Schweizer Alpenclub*, vol XXIII, Bern, 1887-8, reproduced in *Alpine Journal*, XIV, p263. *'At the annual meeting at Bienne in August 1887, the question of mountaineering without guides was warmly discussed. It was finally agreed that any direction of the club* [SAC] *in the matter would lead to no good result, if it did not aggravate the evil.'*

39. A Lunn, *A Century of Mountaineering 1857-1957*, 1957, p239.

40. F Pollock, 'In Memoriam', *Alpine Journal*, X, 1882, p81. Even Leslie Stephen, a strong advocate of mountain guides, stated in the late 1880s that *'a man should, if possible, qualify himself to climb without guides. To take a guide is an obvious precaution, necessary for some people even in the simplest expeditions, unnecessary for others even in the most difficult. Every vigorous young man should try to place himself in the class which can dispense with guides. That is the way to restore the charm of novelty to peaks already climbed. […] And in this matter, I hold that the Alpine Club should do everything in its power to set a high standard, to condemn all rashness, and to point out that it is as dangerous to dispense with a guide as to dispense with a rope in crossing hidden crevasses, until you have skill and experience enough to be capable of acting as a guide to yourself.'* L Stephen, 'Alpine Notes', *Alpine Journal*, XIII, 1888, p469.

41. For instance: J Farrar, 'Passages in 1860' *Alpine Journal*, XXX, 1916, p25. *'The two brothers Alfred and Sandbach Parker were elected members of the Alpine Club, on guideless qualifications, in December 1860, and remained members for many years.'*. On the other hand, many, but not all, did oppose this new tendency to leave behind mountain guides. *'As regards guideless climbing, Mathews did not go so far as some older men, who protested against it altogether.'* F Morshead, 'In Memoriam', *Alpine Journal*, XXII, 1905, p597.

42. J Stogdon, 'Random Memories of Some Early Guideless Climbs', *Alpine Journal*, XXX, 1916, p147.

A Change of Heart[43]

The Alpine Club's objection to guideless climbing was diminishing towards the end of the 19th century.[44] From the 1870s onwards guideless mountaineering had been properly discussed by the Alpine Club, but it was only then than it became widely accepted.[45] 'It may be said,' the president Charles Pilkington told the Alpine Club in 1899, 'that at no time in our history has climbing without guides been more popular than at present. In days of yore the words 'guideless climbing' have often been the prelude to a note of warning; but a glance over the names associated with recent guideless expeditions suggests that the time-honoured admonition may now be withheld.'[46]

The process of this acceptance can be seen in the way the *Alpine Journal* approached the subject. Before c1880 reports on guideless ascents were more or less absent. Over the course of the 1880s more and more first-hand reports of guideless expeditions were published.[47] These were accepted but the Alpine Club remained very prudent as they 'strongly felt that Messrs Gardiner and Pilkingtons' example was only to be followed with impunity by equally competent mountaineers; and that there is no reason for the club to alter its previously expressed opinion that 'mountaineering without guides' is for 'the general a highly dangerous form of amusement which it is its duty, as a body, to discourage.'[48]

The 'Alpine Obituary' in the 1884 edition of the *Alpine Journal*, written by the founding member C E Mathews, offers another excellent example of this Alpine Club point of view. Mathews warns his readers of the dangers of guideless climbing as well as solo climbing.[49] He does not condemn it but warns people about the possible dangers.[50] A few years later, guideless

43. Outside of the Alps, after early experiments in the Andes and Himalaya, the practice of using European guides quickly disappeared. Local men, often Sherpas, performed some of the functions of early guides, but were employed as high-altitude porters rather than climbing guides on the mountain. Only recently have they acquired the high technical skills of modern guides.

44. H Walker, 'Address to the Alpine Club' *Alpine Journal*, XVI, 1893, p288. *'Guideless climbing, which, under proper conditions, has received the approval of the authorities on mountaineering, has been increasingly practiced.'* D Freshfield, 'An Address to the Alpine Club', *Alpine Journal*, XVIII, 1897, p12. *'Then in some independent minds a bold counsel of perfection was broached – to climb without guides. The first Englishman to put it in practice succeeded only in proving that for some people, including himself, the experiment was too rash. The conservatives among us chuckled prematurely over the indiscretions Mr Girdlestone revealed to the world. For meantime another party, Mr Charles Pilkington, Mr Lawrence Pilkington, and Mr Gardiner, were steadily setting themselves to be as capable as guides. The experiment, in my opinion, was perfectly legitimate, it has proved successful, and it has led to a great advance in mountaineering. It may be granted that in the very front rank of mountaineers there will always be two guides to every amateur. […] But I do not see my way to allow much more. I am conscious that this is indeed a change from the time – before 1885 – when to whisper that an amateur might become nearly as a good as a guide was held to be the mark of a vain boaster or an ignorant person. But, judging from recent experience, there are now members of the Club with whom I would rather go up a mountain that with any guide out of the first rank.'* C Pilkington, 'Address to the Alpine Club', *The Alpine Journal*, XIX, 1899, pp296-7. *'But whoever was the first offender, guideless climbing gradually came to be recognized as a necessary evil, and the older members of the Club slowly yielded their assent. But they only did so with many protests and much good advice, recognizing that in this matter we should move cautiously if we were to ensure safety.'*

45. D Freshfield, 'Proceedings of the Club', *Alpine Journal*, VI, 1874, p256. *'Mr. Macdonald observed that 'Mountaineering without Guides' had been recently fully considered the Club.'*

46. H Woolley, 'Address to the Alpine Club', *Alpine Journal*, XXV, 1911, p375.

47. F Gardiner, 'Mountaineering in Dauphiné Without Guides', *Alpine Journal*, IX, 1880, pp219-34. *'Mr. Gardiner and his companions (Messrs C and L Pilkington) were on all sides warmly congratulated on the remarkable success of their experiment.'*

48. D Freshfield (ed), 'Proceedings of the Alpine Club', *Alpine Journal*, IX, 1880, p240.

49. During the 19th century, and after, the Alpine Club seriously opposed the idea of solitary mountaineering. H Walker, 'Address to the Alpine Club', *Alpine Journal*, XVI, 1893, p288. *'There is one form of it, however, which has been unsparingly condemned from this chair, of which, I regret to say, sporadic cases still occur. I refer to solitary climbing.'*

50. C Mathews, 'The Alpine Obituary', *Alpine Journal*, XI, 1884, pp78-89.

The great A F Mummery and an unidentified climber on Cristallo in the Dolomites. It was Mummery more than anyone who articulated the philosophical foundations of guideless climbing.

climbing had become 'an interesting, and legitimate outgrowth of modern mountaineering,'[51] provided that the necessary caution was taken into account. Otherwise 'guideless climbing is likely to fall into disrepute, and a most admirable form of exercise would thus be condemned, owing to the carelessness of a few of the increasing number who find pleasure in such climbing.'[52]

But even though guideless climbing was no longer in theory problematic, the notion of guideless climbing by insufficiently trained, inexperienced or reckless climbers absolutely was. The long-serving *Alpine Journal* editor George Yeld wrote in 1907 of 'the dangerous increase in the numbers of unqualified, guideless parties attempting the great peaks. We have no quarrel with guideless climbing. An expert has every right to choose for himself, and there is far more of mountaineering and of holiday in crossing a small pass with tried friends for pleasure than in being treated as an item in the

51. C Mathews, 'The Growth of Mountaineering', *Alpine Journal*, X, 1882, p256.
52. W Coolidge (ed), 'Alpine Notes', *Alpine Journal*, XII, 1886, p423.

business of a big climb by an unsympathetic peasant.'[53] Snobbery aside, this is a point of view still held by most, if not all, mountaineering associations.

The Impact of Disapproval

It is almost – if not entirely – impossible to measure the precise effects of the Alpine Club's position on guideless mountaineering towards its members. We can only speculate on the number of British mountaineers climbing with guides who would have taken on guideless climbing if the Alpine Club had been more indulgent. Notable guideless mountaineers G W Young and A F Mummery reflected thoroughly on their own stance towards guideless climbing.[54] They and others were strong proponents of guideless climbing in practice, but more so in their writings. Perhaps in the distinction between their practice and theoretical principles we can deduce some of the effects of the conservative approach of the Alpine Club.

Not only did Geoffrey Winthrop Young continue to climb with mountain guides, he formed strong partnerships, even comradeships with them, particularly Joseph Knubel. He identified, perhaps paradoxically, more than most with the romanticised ideal type observed above. Young struggled with his own views on guideless climbing. It was his theoretical ideal, but in practice he held on to 'his' mountain guide, just as many others did. Even though they were more often seen as chaperons than true mountain guides, this habit reveals the dominant vision within the British mountaineering community. Even on 'easier' excursions many mountaineers, even as late as the early 20th century, felt the need to hire one or more guides, even if it was only because they 'thought it discreet to engage a […] guide.'[55]

This culture of guided climbing was also reflected in how guided climbs were presented in the *Alpine Journal* and how there was an attempt to minimise the difference between guided and guideless ascents.[56] Top climbers tried to minimise the very real distinction between guideless and guided climbing: as for instance in the following passage from *Mountain Craft*, quoted in an essay on Young written by Arnold Lunn: '… he will not allow his decision to take a guide to be influenced by any fear that the credit of his party will be diminished in any competent mountaineer's eyes by the fact that a prejudiced or a thoughtless modern virtuosity might jeer at it as "guided".'[57] The influence of a more conservative tradition of mountaineering is set against a new and rapidly developing trend. Both had met in the seminal figure of Geoffrey Winthrop Young.

53. G Yeld (ed), 'Alpine Accidents in 1907', *Alpine Club*, XXIII, 1907, p638.
54. A Mummery, *My Climbs in the Alps and Caucasus*, 1895; G Young, *On High Hills & Mountain Craft*, 1927 & 1920.
55. G Young, *On High Hills*, 1927, p63. *'All the same, since the Finsteraarhorn was to be our training walk, we thought it discreet to engage a crabbed but respectable local guide as a chaperon, for our introduction at least.'*
56. If Young preferred guideless climbing, he mostly climbed with guides, particularly Knubel. *'I admit that I climb with a guide. The confession is painful but necessary, and I must hope that the weakness will be attributed not so much to a want of originality as to a preference for a sense of security. I find that, take him all round, the guide meets me in better training, lasts rather longer, and occasionally climbs even better than the majority of amateurs with a month's holiday …'* Arnold Lunn considered Young's association with Knubel *'had far more in common with that which unites members of a guideless party.'* A Lunn, 'Geoffrey Winthrop Young', *Alpine Journal*, 1961, pp100-17.
57. A Lunn, 'Geoffrey Winthrop Young', *Alpine Journal*, 1961, pp114.