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## Hilda Hechle

and Other Women Mountain Artists

In this year of celebrating women's mountaineering, I sought to decorate the *Alpine Journal* with suitable frontispieces and to give some account of British women mountain artists. I apologise for the incomplete nature of this review but plead in my defence the inaccessibility of libraries, galleries and other institutions during the Covid-19 pandemic.

**Hilda Marion Hechle** (1886-1939) was born at Brassington Manor House, the home of the Breakell family, to Una Marion Breakell and Henry John Hechle. The Hechles were a Liverpool family and Henry inherited enough to spare him the trouble of working. Among the many Breakell siblings, at least one – Mary Louise – was a successful artist, and author of a watercolour 'how-to' book still read today.

In the 1890s the Hechles moved to north Wales. Hilda attended St John's Wood Art School and then the Royal Academy Schools, and eventually became a member of the Royal Society of British Artists (RBA) in 1926, and the Society of Women Artists in 1929.<sup>1</sup> However, before treading the beaten trails of London art education she had exhibited at Liverpool's Walker Gallery in 1903, and began to visit the Alps to climb and sketch while still a teenager. Presumably, she was accompanied by a parent or two, although her mother became ill and was confined to a Liverpool asylum by 1901, and we know from press reports that latterly her father accompanied her.<sup>2</sup> In 1905 she encountered William Ling and Harold Raeburn at the Montenvers and traversed the Petit Charmoz with them, Ling praising her performance in his usual paternalistic fashion 'our companion took [the awkward pitch at the summit] in good style and with plenty of pluck.'<sup>3</sup>

In the same year she sketched the Brenva glacier and the resulting watercolour was accepted for the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition in 1906 when she had just turned 19. She exhibited mountain watercolours throughout her life, in the annual exhibitions of the Alpine Club and the Ladies' Alpine Club, at RA, SWA and RBA annual exhibitions and in at least two solo exhibitions in the St George's Gallery in Hanover Square. As well as drawing mountains, she produced 'fairy paintings' conforming to certain Edwardian and post-war tastes and even added fairies and goblins

1. Hechle is a featured artist in Peter Mallalieu's *Artists of the Alpine Club* (2007), which includes basic biographical information about her.

2. *London Weekly Dispatch*, 8 Feb 1925.

3. *Ling's Diary*, Book 5, p39, AC Archives. Ling's diary records his every mountain day between 1893 and 1953, a historical record of immense value.



William Ling and Hilda Hechle at the Montenvers Hotel, 1905.

to perfectly realistic north Wales scenic postcards, as well as providing illustrations to accompany various literary works.

Her mountain works were of uneven quality, but at her best she was as good as any of her contemporaries, excelling in the depiction of glaciers, skies and atmospheric effects, and demonstrating sureness of line and colouring in all her works. Hechle joined the Ladies' Alpine Club in 1923 and her contributions to its yearbook are accessible through Johanna Merz's index, published in 2000. Among these was a lecture titled 'Mountains in Art' in 1929. The yearbook for 1929 (p40) gives some details of this, including a golden nugget of advice, valid for photographers as well as for artists, 'that the best place from which to draw one mountain is from half way up another.'

Despite my best efforts, I managed to find only eight of her mountain pictures to use as frontispieces. In the captions, I have given any existing titles in

Constance Gordon-Cumming, aged 50, from her 1904 autobiography *Memories*.

single quotes followed by descriptive titles without quotes. Three of the frontispieces deserve a little additional comment:

'South side of Mont Blanc: the Brenva Glacier' shows the part of the face containing the *Old Brenva* route. This beautiful watercolour uses portrait format to great effect, and demonstrates great precocity.

'Nocturne des Alpes', the Blumisalp group from the Oeschinen See. This large and impressive oil painting is unusual as to medium: other works in oil by her are rare.



It may well be based on a watercolour of the same scene, which was sold on eBay a few years ago. There is a full description of the 'Nocturne' with a useful biography on the Maas Gallery's website.

'Weissshorner', possibly a title invented by a dealer, is probably 'Monte Rosa Group – Dawn' exhibited in 1927 and described by a reviewer as showing 'a luminous green sky with the clouds curling off the summits'.<sup>4</sup> Other reviews mention that she stopped at the Solvay refuge on the Matterhorn and spent the morning sketching there.<sup>5</sup> This impressive drawing is perfectly compatible with the view from the Solvay. One might complain about the Lyskamm, which is drawn rather undersized, but it is surely an outstanding evocation of a high Alpine dawn.

I am grateful to our members Tony Astill and Tom Smallwood for providing images, and to Rupert Maas for the 'Nocturne' and advice.

**Constance Frederika Gordon-Cumming** (1837-1924), known to her friends as 'Eka', was the daughter of William Gordon Gordon-Cumming, 2nd Baronet of Altyre and Gordonstoun and Eliza Maria Campbell. She was blessed with rich relatives, including 11 siblings, and well-connected friends scattered about the globe. In 1867 she visited India, which marked the start of 12 years of continuous travelling, encompassing the Himalaya, Ceylon, Fiji, Tahiti, the Californian mountains, China, and the volcanoes of Hawaii and Japan. Although not a mountaineer in the conventional sense – what club might she have joined? – Gordon-Cumming was a strong walker, an enthusiastic camper and climbed Mount Fuji, the Hawaiian volcanoes and several of the Yosemite trails to the valley rim.

Her art was self-taught but regularly exercised. She painted over a thousand watercolours and worked with the motto: 'never a day without at least one careful-coloured sketch'. She was one of a few intrepid solo women travellers of the Victorian period. Marianne North and Isabella Bird

4. *The Times*, 1 Apr 1927

5. *Western Mail*, 2 Mar 1927

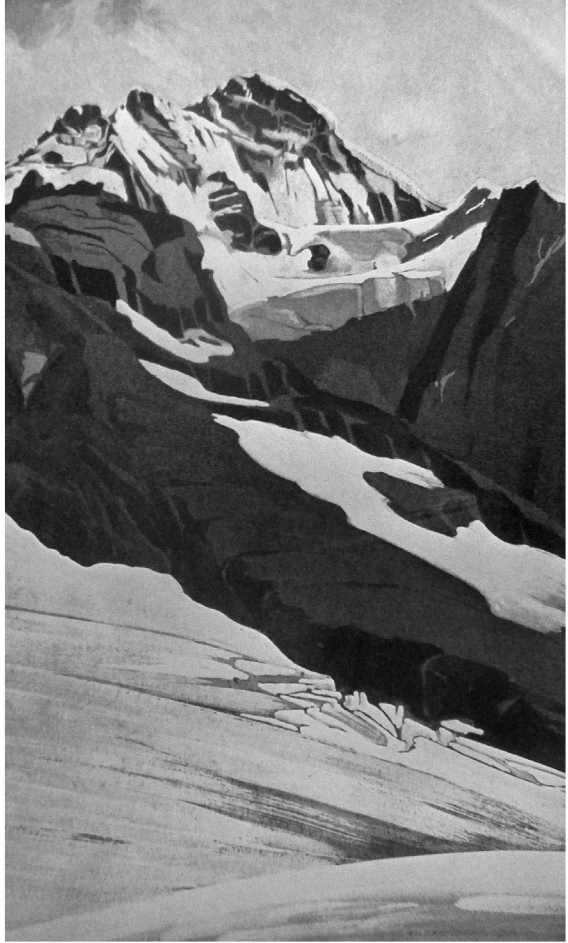


Beatrice Lithiby,  
c1937.



Ulrica Hyde,  
self-portrait bust.

'Jungfrau from  
the Eiger Glacier',  
by Beatrice Lithiby,  
*LAC Yearbook* 1938.



were two others. Although Marianne North was a better artist, Gordon-Cumming was more of a mountain artist than North. She was enchanted by Yosemite valley, extending what was intended as a three-day visit to three months, and wrote an illustrated book about it.<sup>6</sup> I am indebted to the very full Wikipedia entry for much of the above information.

The three watercolours used as frontispieces are more or less self-explanatory. 'The Khyas Mountains from Pangi' shows perhaps Jorkanden (6473m) and the sharp peak of Kinnaur Kailas (6050m), the object of a popular pilgrimage but not to be confused with the better-known Kailas further east. In the view of Fuji, the Otome pass connects Hakone and Gotemba, which town lurks below the cloud-sea. 'Yosemite Falls', like Hechle's pictures of the Brenva and the Mischabel, shows the value of portrait format in giving

6. *Granite Crags*, Blackwood, 1884.



Ulrica Hyde's woodcut 'Mountain Hare' from the *LAC Yearbook* 1938.

full value to height. Her pictures, though carefully executed and important records of early exotic travel, perhaps lack beauty of line and colour. I am grateful to Chris Beetles Gallery, London and to PBA Galleries, San Francisco for providing the images of Fuji and 'Yosemite Falls'.

The Ladies' Alpine Club fostered women's art by mounting annual exhibitions in its clubroom in the Great Central Hotel in Marylebone.<sup>7</sup> Many contributors to these exhibitions were established artists, but their works have mostly vanished from public view, one would hope temporarily. **Beatrice Ethel Lithiby** (1890-1966) trained in the Royal Academy Schools, served as a war artist in Queen Mary's Army Auxiliary Corps in the Great War, and joined the RBA in 1930. She contributed some works to the LAC's yearbook, and one of these is shown below: she was clearly a very able mountain artist. **Ulrica Hyde** (1911-87) – full name Margery Ulrica Fitzwilliams-Hyde – trained at the Royal College of Art, and became a successful sculptor and wood engraver. She had the double misfortune to lose her father in the last days of the First World War and her brother in the last days of the Second,

7. A huge Victorian Gothic pile now known as The Landmark. The original Victorian restaurant survives on a basement floor.



Edouard Bareux, Una Cameron and Elisée Croux at their Caucasus camp in 1932, published in *A Good Line*, Cameron's account of the expedition.

both killed in action. She served as a sergeant in the Royal Army Service Corps in Cairo and met her husband, the well-known archaeologist Seton Lloyd there. She contributed works to the LAC exhibitions and yearbooks, and one of these – an impressive woodcut of a mountain hare – is shown here. **Una May Cameron** (1904-87) was the first of twins, her

sister being Bertha Dewar. Her mother Jane was one of the whisky Dewars, so she was born with a silver spoon filled with liquid gold. She received her art education at the Central School of Arts and Crafts, London, and in Rome. Her favoured medium was woodcut and she exhibited these regularly at the LAC and in the yearbooks. Unlike the other women artists reviewed here, Cameron was a formidable climber, fortified by wealth and ambition and armed with two guides Edouard Bareux and Elisée Croux. And she was no ordinary woman: avoiding marriage, she cut a dash around London and Courmayeur in powerful open-top sports cars, smoking a pipe or cigars. She climbed all over the world, but lived latterly at La Palud above Courmayeur whence she climbed almost every available route on Mont Blanc.<sup>8</sup>

8. She is featured in Mallalieu's *Artists of the Alpine Club*, 2007, p26, and was the subject of a wonderful obituary notice by Janet Adam Smith in *AJ* 1988, pp323-6. See the no less wonderful appraisal of her climbing life, also from Janet Adam Smith, in *AJ* 1990, pp157-73.