

Chapter 9

**At Play in the Mountains:
The Development of British Mountaineering in the Romantic Period**

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Summing up the formal characteristics of play, we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside “ordinary” life as being “not serious”, but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means.

Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*¹**“wot a broghtin yoa here?”: the Question of Climbing**

In November 1797, the former soldier Joseph Budworth, who wrote for the *Gentleman’s Magazine* under the pseudonym of “Rambler,” set out with his guide Paul Postlethwaite, the son of a local farmer, to climb “to the summit of Langdale Pike” (now known as Pike o’ Stickle).² This adventure was part of a return visit to the English Lake District for Budworth, who had described his previous walking tour of the area in

¹ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Bungay, Suffolk: Paladin, 1970), 32. References to this work are hereafter cited within parentheses within the text.

² Joseph Budworth, *A Fortnight’s Ramble to the Lakes*, 3rd edn, (London: Joseph Palmer 1810), 265. References to this work are hereafter cited within parentheses within the text.

his travel book *A Fortnight's Ramble to the Lakes in Westmoreland, Lancashire, and Cumberland* of 1792. This earlier trip had itself included some notable climbing feats alongside the more standard ascents of Skiddaw and the Old Man of Coniston, including what Budworth himself claimed as the first ascent by a “stranger” of Helm Crag in Grasmere, of which he commented that: “Although we ascended many hills higher than Helm Crag, as it has never been visited by strangers, and the ascent is so very difficult, I think it deserves being mentioned in speaking of mountains” (264). Langdale Pike was an even more ambitious target and Budworth describes how he and Postlethwaite both equipped themselves with “a long pole with a pike to it” and “started like hardy mountaineers” (266). In describing himself as a “mountaineer”, Budworth offers, an early example of someone from outside a mountainous region claiming for themselves the identity of of the mountaineer, one native to such a region.³ Like Helm Crag, Pike O’Stickle was a peak that forced Budworth to “scramble”, a term he uses that remains in current usage for mountain ascents that require the use of hands. The gnarly peak provided “many rough rocks to scramble up” and required Budworth and his guide “to haul ourselves by rocks to bring us to the crown of Langdale Pike, which is about twenty yards in circumference” (266-7).

It was while seated on the summit of Pike O’Stickle that Budworth started to consider his motivation for the hazardous climb, an issue raised by his guide, as Budworth describes:

Paul Postlethwaite sat down by me, and, after answering my questions, thought he had a natural right to make his own:

³ On the shifting meaning of the word “mountaineer”, especially as illustrated by Budworth, see my “Romantic Writers and Mountaineering”, *Romanticism*, 18.1 (2012): 1.

P.P. Ith' neome oh fackins, wot a broghtin yoa here?

Ramb[ler]. Curiosity, Paul.

P.P. I think yoa mun be kurious enuff; I neor cum here bu after runaway
sheop, an I'me then so vext at um, I cud throa um deawn th'Poike.'

(269)

Postlethwaite's puzzlement at Budworth's climbing ambitions emphasizes the combination of peril and play in the nascent sport of mountaineering. For the native inhabitant, the treacherous crags of Langdale should only be climbed for a specific purpose, the rescuing of errant sheep, and even then the inherent danger of the enterprise calls its value into question. To undertake such a risky pursuit with only the vaguely defined motivation of curiosity is beyond Postlethwaite's comprehension; the climber himself becomes "kurious enuff" in his failure to conform to familiar and understandable patterns of behavior.

Budworth's account exemplifies the development of British mountaineering in the Romantic period as a form of "play," as defined by the Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga in his seminal work *Homo Ludens* of 1938.⁴ While the activity that Samuel Taylor Coleridge christened ""mountaineering"" in 1802⁵ emerged out of a range practices, and remained entangled with them, it was during the Romantic period that the climbing of peaks "interpolate[d] itself as a temporary activity satisfying in itself and ending there," to quote Huizinga. Budworth's ascents of Helm Crag and Langdale Pike illustrate how mountaineering started to be undertaken in the period

⁴ For an introduction to *Homo Ludens* and an examination of the critical debates around it, see Robert Anchor, "Johan Huizinga and His Critics," *History and Theory*, vol. 17, no. 1 (Feb. 1978): 63-93.

⁵ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956-71), 2.848.

as an end in itself, performed for its own pleasures, challenges and gratifications rather than according to the strictures of the scientific, antiquarian or picturesque expeditions out of which it evolved. It is this sense of climbing as play that troubles Postlethwaite about the Langdale Pike scramble. For the farmer's son as shepherd or guide, the climb of the Pike is a dangerous economic necessity; as he informs his client "I bin heor oth'Poike oftnor an he loikd"(270). For Postlethwaite, Budworth's climb exemplifies what Huizinga identifies as one of the major characteristics of play, it is "superfluous," "a function which he could equally well leave alone" (26).

Huizinga's account of the first three major characteristics of play helps grasp the contrasting meanings of climbing Langdale Pike for the "Rambler" and his guide, meanings which are obviously informed by economic and class status. For Huizinga, the first main characteristic of play is "that it is free, is in fact freedom" (26). He writes that:

The need for [play] is only urgent to the extent that the enjoyment of it makes it a need. Play can be deferred or suspended at any time. It is never imposed by physical necessity or moral duty. It is never a task. It is done at leisure, during "free time". (26)

Clearly, in these terms, while climbing Langdale Pike is an act of "freedom" for Budworth, undertaken at leisure during the free time of a walking tour, for Postlethwaite it is a "task". To this characteristic of freedom, Huizinga adds a second, "that play is not 'ordinary' or 'real' life. It is rather a stepping out of 'real' life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own" (26). For Budworth, his adventure in the mountains enables him as "Rambler" to step out of his own life. Temporarily, the "stranger" assumes the same identity as Postlethwaite, the

“mountaineer.” Postlethwaite himself, however, remains within the realities of his own life, identity and native region. This sense of the different meanings of the mountain region and the time spent in it for the “stranger” and the local guide brings us to the third of Huizinga’s characteristics of play, what he terms “its secludedness, its limitedness:” “Play is distinct from ‘ordinary’ life as to both locality and duration ... It is ‘played out’ within certain limits of time and place. It contains its own course and meaning” (28). For Budworth, the mountainous region of the Lake District performs in exemplary fashion the function of what Huizinga calls the “play-ground,” a term which itself echoes the title of one of the classics of mountaineering literature, Leslie Stephen’s *The Playground of Europe*.⁶ At the end of his time in the Lakes, Budworth will leave the “secluded” and “limited” play arena and return to his “ordinary” world. For Postlethwaite, the area is all that he knows. He informs Budworth that “I bin at Hawkshead, at a feor – an I bin at Ambleside, an he ah bib at Grassmere” (269-70), all villages within a few miles of his family farm at Langdale. For Postlethwaite the possibilities of play would require him to step beyond his own locality, as he did when visiting the Hawkshead fair. Though the farmer’s son does also have greater ambitions, telling his employer that “I sud loike to goa as far ev’ry way (*getting up and turning round*) as I see neaw, or mure. I sud loike t’ see Lunnun on St. Paul’s” (270).

In this essay, I want to develop this argument for the emergence of mountaineering as a form of play in the Romantic period. In doing so, I will provide a new way of understanding the development of this remarkable activity, engaging with but offering a different emphasis to the majority of work in the growing field of

⁶ Leslie Stephen, *The Playground of Europe* (London: Spottiswoode and Co, 1871).

mountaineering studies which tends to approach the subject through the politics of class, gender, identity, region and nation, as in Peter J. Hansen's recent major study *The Summits of Modern Man: Mountaineering after the Enlightenment*.⁷ My approach also differs from most of the work in the field by shifting the focus away from the much-studied histories of major mountains; Hansen's book, for example, is primarily concerned with Mont Blanc with additional sections on Mont Ventoux, the Matterhorn and Mount Everest. My own focus is the development of play in British mountains, which I will explore through analysis of a wide range of rarely-studied texts of mountain travel, read within the ~~To do so, I will read a wide range of the period's mountain travel writing within the~~ framework of Huizinga's theory~~account of~~ play. I will show how ascending mountains was initially undertaken for specific purposes, such as the collection of scientific data and specimens, and with a particular reward in mind, such as that provided by a summit view. I will then examine how people discovered in mountaineering an activity that became an end in itself. By way of introduction, I want to use this opening section to give an idea of the growth of mountaineering in Britain as a recreational activity and to show how when practised as play, rather than as a pursuit with an end in mind, it frequently provoked versions of Postlethwaite's question, "Ith' neome oh fackins, wot a broghtin yoa here?"

Budworth was an adventurous and pioneering climber who undertook most of his ascents by himself or in the company of a guide. During the period 1770-1837, however, the ascent of mountains was becoming an increasingly popular leisure pursuit in Britain, particularly in the areas visited as part of the domestic tour: the Lake

⁷ Peter H. Hansen, *The Summits of Modern Man: Mountaineering after the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013).

District, North Wales and the Highlands of Scotland. For example, in 1792, the same year that Budworth was making his “first ascent by a stranger” of Helm Crag, Charles Ross reported that “In the months of July, August and September, the summit of Ben Lomond is frequently visited by strangers from every quarter of the island, as well as by foreigners.”⁸ Ben Lomond is the most southerly of the Scottish peaks over 3,000 feet and for many tourists its ascent became an obligatory rather than an optional part of their tour. James Denholm ~~reported~~ commented in 1804 that: “The greatest part of travellers who visit Loch Lomond upon a pleasure excursion, in general take advantage of the ferry at Inveruglas, and cross the lake to ascend Ben Lomond.”⁹ As Denholm’s account illustrates, during this period there was a developing infrastructure that provided support for those who wished to climb mountains. For Ben Lomond, this infrastructure included the ferry across the Loch and an inn, where a short stay was usually made “before attempting the swelling mountain, and where a guide is at hand to conduct you, by the best and readiest track, to the summit.”¹⁰

It is, of course, impossible to provide precise numbers of those who ascended Ben Lomond or the other popular peaks ~~during the period~~, such as Skiddaw and Snowdon, during the period. However, contemporary reports would suggest that in fine weather in the summer season these three summits were busy places. When Thomas Wilkinson climbed Ben Lomond in 1787, he was joined by a party that he described as “a genteel company, consisting of twelve persons, (six of either sex,) two guides, a black servant, and a pony with provisions.”¹¹ This is a remarkable summit

⁸ Quoted in Ian Mitchell, *Scotland’s Mountains before the Mountaineers* (Edinburgh: Luath Press, 1998), 24.

⁹ James Denholm, *A Tour to the Principal Scotch and English Lakes* (Glasgow: A Macgoun, 1804), p. 39.

¹⁰ Denholm, *Tour*, 39.

¹¹ Thomas Wilkinson, *Tours to the British Mountains* (London: Taylor and Hessey, 1824), 16.

scene, interesting not only as an illustration of the climb's popularity, but also because of the gender and race of the climbers. Mountaineering as play is open to women as well as men, but for non-whites or the lower classes, climbing is an economic labor or necessity, as we have already seen in the case of Paul Postlethwaite. Two decades after Wilkinson's ascent, in 1805, ~~one source~~ George Smith was reported ~~ing~~ that "many persons undergo the fatigue of climbing up to the top of [Ben Lomond's] highest point."¹² This frustratingly vague term "many" is quite frequently used to suggest the high numbers of those participating in the culture of ascent, or some element of it, as when Robert Hasell Newell commented in 1821 that "Many go up [Snowdon] to see the sun-rise."¹³ By the 1830s the number of people on the summits of the most popular mountains could disconcert those looking for a more solitary, spiritual experience. In 1837, for example, the Scottish naturalist and ornithologist William MacGillivray denounced the large numbers of urban pleasure-seekers he encountered on the most popular summits, writing that:

I cannot but look upon it as a gross profanation to enact in the midst of the sublimities of creation a convivial scene, such as is usually got up by parties from our large towns, who seem to have no higher aim in climbing to the top of Benlomond or Benledi than to feast there upon cold chicken and "mountain dew," and toss as many stones as they can find over the precipices.¹⁴

¹² George Smith, *Gleanings of a Wanderer in Various Parts of England, Scotland, and North Wales* (1805), 107.

¹³ Robert Hasell Newell, *Letters on the Scenery of Wales* (London: Baldwin, Cradock, and Joy, 1821), 158.

¹⁴ William MacGillivray, *History of British Birds Indigenous and Migratory* (London: Scott, Webster, and Geary, 1837), 204.

McGillivray's account of the number of people on the tops of Ben Lomond and Ben Ledi illustrates that by the close of the Romantic period mountain ascent was well established as a leisure past-time for an increasingly large section of society. Like Budworth's exchange with Postlethwaite Partridge, McGillivray's irritated words also reveal a clash of mountaineering cultures occurring on the very summit of the mountain. His use of the words "profanation" and "sublimities" indicate the sacred and aesthetic values with which he invested peaks. What he objects to is the use of mountains as a place of recreation for an urban population whose ascents constitute a form of fashionable consumption, equivalent to the feasting upon cold chicken and drinking of "mountain due" indulged in by those who participate in such ascents.¹⁵ With its sense of conviviality, finding fun in rolling stones off the sides of the peak (an activity known as "trundling" – that was also enjoyed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Samuel Taylor Coleridge), McGillivray's summit scene again enacts the emergence of mountain climbing as play. It also provides an alternative image of mountaineering in the period to that at the centre of Hansen's study, 'in which modern man stands alone on the summit, autonomous from other men'.¹⁶

The development of mountain climbing in the Romantic period as a form of play is also illustrated by the changing accounts of motivation for ascents given by those who undertook them. In the next section, I will look in greater detail at the different cultures out of which climbing emerged, but by way of introducing the shift in motivation it is worth quoting one example that reveals the desire to reach a summit

¹⁵ A more positive response to the high numbers climbing Ben Lomond are the paintings of Glaswegian landscape artist, John Knox, which include several groupings of individuals high on the mountain, a good visual illustration of the popularity of climbing at the end of the Romantic period.

¹⁶ Hansen, *Summits of Modern Man*, 2.

as an end in itself. In 1828, M.R. of Liverpool wrote a narrative of his 'Four Days' Ramble in the Neighbourhood of Bangor, North Wales' for *The Kaleidoscope*, commenting that "From the time I landed in North Wales I had looked upon the ascent of Snowdon as a kind of achievement I should like to perform. It would be, I thought, a feat without which all my other excursions would be incomplete".¹⁷ Here, the ascent to the summit is undertaken not for any scientific or aesthetic motivation but for its own sake. As a potential "achievement" and a "feat" in its own right, M.R.'s ambition to climb Snowdon can also be read in terms of Huizinga's account of play. The Dutch historian writes that:

The element of tension ... [in play] plays a particularly important part.

Tension means uncertainty, chanciness; a striving to decide the issue and so end it. The player wants something to "go", to "come off"; he wants to "succeed" by his own exertions. (29)

For M.R., the desire to succeed in his uncertain venture of climbing Snowdon aligns with Huizinga's account of play. A successful ascent by his own exertions will decide the issue and bring his trip to a fitting end, but failure will produce a sense of incompleteness.

The playfulness of mountaineering as it is developed in the Romantic period was highlighted by its potential dangers; the risks associated with climbing emphasized the seeming lack of justification for the pursuit. These dangers were most apparent in the Alps, the arena that a later generation of climbers would come to know as "the playground of Europe." In 1837, the year of Queen Victoria's accession

¹⁷ M.R., "Four Days' Ramble in the Neighbourhood of Bangor, North Wales", *The Kaleidoscope*, ix (30 September 1828): 102.

that we might think of as marking the end of the Romantic period, the *Saturday Magazine* published a lengthy three-part essay entitled “Some Account of the Valley of Chamouni, and the Ascent of Mont Blanc.” Mont Blanc, the highest mountain in Western Europe, had first been climbed in 1786 and had become a focus for the most ambitious mountaineering expeditions of the age. The *Saturday Magazine* printed a list of what by 1837 had been the seventeen successful ascents of the mountain and commented:

It may be amusing to observe the comparatively large number of our countrymen who figure in this list; out of the seventeen successful expeditions they are the heroes of no less than ten. It is easy to assign them the merit of courage and fortitude, – common qualities enough, – it is more difficult to discover any good resulting to mankind from their efforts. The only name in the list which, in the latter point of view, deserves to be, or will be remembered, is that of the Swiss naturalist, De Saussure, always excepting, of course, the names of Paccard and Balmat, who led the way to the summit.¹⁸

As in Paul Postlethwaite’s response to Budworth’s climb of Langdale Pike and McGillivray’s criticism of the convivial parties on Ben Lomond and Ben Levi, it is the lack of any utilitarian or higher purpose in many of the Mont Blanc ascents that troubles the writer. While those who have climbed the mountain have shown courage and fortitude, the issue of “any good resulting to mankind” from their expeditions remains in question. For this writer, mountaineering is only justified and worth

¹⁸ “Some account of the Valley of Chamouni, and the Ascent of Mont Blanc”, *The Saturday Magazine*, 337 (30 September 1837): 135.

remembering when it serves such a purpose, as he comments: “It is, undoubtedly, true that the ascent of this mountain, when first undertaken for scientific purposes, was an object eminently praiseworthy.”¹⁹ In the next section of this essay, I want to examine the kind of mountaineering expeditions that were undertaken for praiseworthy purposes and that were used as comparison for the developing culture of climbing as play.

Climbing with a Purpose: Scientific and Picturesque Mountaineering

The playful culture of British mountaineering that developed in the Romantic period emerged out of climbing cultures that had some specific objective or purpose as the intended aim of their ascents, be these the collection of scientific data or the gaining of an elevated summit prospect. During the eighteenth century, the ascent of peaks was practically and symbolically linked to the ambitions of natural philosophy or science. Many of the first recorded climbs of Britain’s highest peaks were undertaken for specific scientific purposes, such as the search for rare botanical specimens that led to the first known ascent of Ben Nevis in 1771.²⁰ Similarly several climbs of the Scottish mountain Schiehallion were undertaken in 1774 to measure its height in a project led by the Astronomer Royal Nevil Maskelyne to ascertain the mass of the earth.²¹ Elsewhere in Scotland, scientific and cartographic ambitions prompted the earliest known ascents of many peaks and stimulated the emergence of some of the age’s most prodigious mountaineers, as described by Ian Mitchell in his excellent

¹⁹ *The Saturday Magazine*, 347 (25 November 1837): 216.

²⁰ Ken Crocket and Simon Richardson, *Ben Nevis: Britain’s Highest Mountain*, 2nd edition (Place?: Scottish Mountaineering Trust, 2009), 20.

²¹ Nevil Maskeleyne, *An Account of Observations made on the Mountain Schehallien for Finding its Attraction ... Read at the Royal Society, July 6, 1775* (London, 1776).

Scotland's Mountains before the Mountaineers. Two of the most significant climbers of the first part of the nineteenth century developed their roles as mountaineers within these cartographic and scientific contexts. John MacCulloch, who Mitchell has described as probably deserving "the title of Scotland's first peak bagger" and who was "out to climb as many hills as possible,"²² worked for the Ordnance Survey in Scotland and became the Trigonometrical Survey's geologist, making yearly trips to Scotland from 1811 until 1821, and describing his exploits in his four volume *Highlands and Western Islands of Scotland*. William MacGillivray, the naturalist and author with [John James Audubon](#) of the *History of British Birds* from which I have already quoted, climbed extensively in the Cairngorms and elsewhere in his search for flora and fauna.²³

As we have seen, the *Saturday Magazine* regarded the climbing of Mont Blanc as only praiseworthy when it was "first undertaken for scientific purposes," and this link between mountaineering and the natural sciences was strengthened by the mutually reinforcing symbolism of discovery and achievement. For scientifically-motivated climbers, the summit was a place of experimentation and revelation where elevation unveiled new knowledge. By gathering their data through arduous and sometimes dangerous ascents, natural scientists were able to instill an heroic and daring air into their own exploits. An important and inspirational figure here was the Genevan scientist Horace-Bénédict de Saussure, author of *Voyages dans les Alpes*, who as we have seen was invoked by the *Saturday Magazine's* writer. Saussure was closely linked with the early attempts to climb Mont Blanc, having offered a prize to

²² Mitchell, *Scotland's Mountaineers*, 44, 127.

²³ Mitchell, *Scotland's Mountaineers*, 87-94.

whoever first reached the summit, and had himself made the third climb of the highest peak in Western Europe in 1787, when he spent several hours conducting experiments on the mountain top. De Saussure was frequently invoked by British scientist mountaineers and cited as justification for their own researches on British mountains. De Saussure became the inspiration and the model for many mountain-going scientists, such as the mineralogist Arthur Aikin who lectured in chemistry at Guy's hospital, edited the *Annual Review* from 1803 to 1808, and helped found the Geological and Chemical Societies of London in 1807 and 1841 respectively. In the "Preface" to his *Journal of a Tour Through North Wales* (1797), Aikin gives a self-effacing account of the importance of de Saussure for his own scientific project:

I shall be unfortunate, if, in mentioning the great name of Saussure, I suggest any comparison in the mind of the reader, between the elaborate performances of that eminent mineralogist and the present humble publication; yet I think it right to observe, that the perusal of the *Voyages dans les Alpes*, suggested to me the idea of a tour into Wales upon something of a similar plan, and I have² been not a little pleased in verifying among the Welsh hills some of the general observations laid down by Saussure as the result of his arduous journies among the snows of the Alps.²⁴

²⁴ Arthur Aikin, *Journal of a Tour through North Wales and Part of Shropshire* (London: J. Johnson, 1797), vi-vii.

As the pre-eminent scientific mountaineer of the eighteenth century, who proved such an important stimulus and model for others, Saussure remained a model for climbers throughout the period.²⁵

While scientific motivations inspired many pioneering and exploratory mountain ascents, in Britain it was the picturesque tour that stimulated the development of mountain climbing as a popular leisure pursuit on a larger scale. Though picturesque travel is often associated with low-level views,²⁶ the summit or elevated prospect became increasingly sought-after as viewing station. Thomas West emphasized the advantages of the Lake District over the Alps in his *Guide to the Lakes* of 1778, writing that the Lake District mountains “are all accessible to the summit” and they “furnish prospects no less surprising [and] with more variety than the Alps themselves.”²⁷ In this picturesque culture of mountain climbing, ascent was justified in terms of the view or prospect that the climber would gain. For example, after describing the “laborious ascent” required to reach the top of Skiddaw in 1773, William Hutchinson remarked that “the prospect which we gained from this eminence very well rewarded our fatigue,”²⁸ while Jonathan Otley commented in 1825 that ‘an extensive prospect [is] the principal motive for ascending a mountain.’²⁹ Throughout the period, there developed an increasingly sophisticated aesthetics of elevated

²⁵ For contrasting responses to the scientific and mountaineering legacy of Saussure, see my “A Melancholy Occurrence” in the Alps: Switzerland, Mont Blanc, and an Early Critique of Mountaineering”, in *Romanticism, Rousseau, Switzerland: New Prospects*, ed. Angela Esterhammer, Diane Piccitto, Patrick Vincent (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 150-167.

²⁶ See Malcolm Andrews, *The Search for the Picturesque* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1989), 61.

²⁷ Thomas West, *A Guide to the Lakes* (London: Richardson and Urquhart, 1778), 6.

²⁸ William Hutchinson, *An Excursion to the Lakes, in Westmoreland and Cumberland, in August 1773* (London: J. Wilkie, 1774), 156.

²⁹ Jonathan Otley, *A Concise Description of the English Lakes*, 2nd ed., (Keswick: Jonathan Otley, 1825), 43.

viewing which came to appreciate the spectacle of changing meteorological conditions experienced on a mountain top almost as much as the unbounded prospect seen on a clear day.³⁰

The ~~“Curious”~~ Practice of Mountaineering

The scientific and picturesque cultures of Romantic-period mountaineering generally saw the physical act of climbing as a form of labour worth undertaking for a specific reward, be it scientific data or an elevated view. Increasingly, however, this economic understanding of ascent that separated the effort required for climbing from the gratification produced by elevation was superseded by an engagement in mountaineering as an end in itself, as a form of play as described by Huizinga: “[Play] is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it” (32).

The concept of curiosity, invoked by Joseph Budworth as his motivation for climbing Langdale Pike, provided an intermediate position in this shift from a utilitarian or functional culture of climbing to a more playful engagement in mountaineering. As Nigel Leask has shown in his *Curiosity and the Aesthetics of Travel Writing, 1770-1840*, curiosity was a key if ambivalent term in the period’s travel writing, ~~with both positive and negative meanings. While it could~~ referring to ~~the an~~ ~~positive~~ inclination towards knowledge ~~but, it was also~~ linked to ideas of novelty, singularity and powerful first impressions.³¹ In the mountain writing of the period,

³⁰ See my ~~“Reframing Nature: The Visual Experience of Early Mountaineering”~~, in *The Handbook of Visual Studies*, ed. Ian Heywood and Barry Sandwell (London: Berg, 2012), 220-34.

³¹ Nigel Leask, *Curiosity and the Aesthetics of Travel-Writing, 1770-1840: From an Antique Land* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 4-5.

curiosity retaineds this ambiguity. It was frequently invoked as the motivation that,
referring on the one hand to the instinct that ttookakes the individuals off the beaten
track, to a new (and often perilous) situations and and leading to a sense of discovery.
However, curiosity was also On the other hand, more negatively, the motivation of
curiosity is seen to lack the disciplinary rules of science or aesthetics and is was defined
by its failure to cohere to proper categories.

Curiosity wais linked to the encounter with danger in many of the period's
ascent narrative. In his *A Tour Of Wales*, Thomas Pennant describes how on Snowdon's
summit: "One of the company had the curiosity to descend a very bad way to a jutting
rock, that impended over the monstrous precipice; and he seemed like *Mercury* ready
to take his flight from the summit of *Atlas*."³² Here "curiosity" would seem to imply a
general sense of exploration and daring for the sake of a new sensation but with no
specific object in mind. Similarly, the encounter with danger was central to Budworth's
conception of himself as a curious walker. "Curiosity," which he describes as "that
spur to idle minds" (97), was the stated motivation for his mountaineering
adventures. In *Rambles* he terms his pioneering ascents "curiosity walks" and presents
himself as well known in the area for undertaking them; while seeking his guide to
ascend Langdale Pike, he describes how the Postlethwaite family "had often heard of
my 'curiosity walks,' [and] they thought I might do it [make the ascent]" (266). In other
words, it is Budworth's record as a curious walker that provides his credentials for the
dangerous climb of Langdale Pike. At the end of the period, the word was still being
used to provide a justification for a perilous undertaking. Edward Baines defended his

³² Thomas Pennant, *A Tour in Wales*. MDCCCLXX, 2 vols. (London, 1778), 2.162-3.

decision to climb Helvellyn by the ridge Striding Edge, despite being advised against it, as follows: “in spite of the warnings of our boatman, we chose it, being incited by curiosity.”³³ Baines’s statement of motivation echoes those made by climbers embarking on grander scale projects, but doing so without specific scientific motivation. For example, in 1818, the Polish traveller Count Matzewski described the reasons for his ascent of Mont Blanc as “Curiosity, and the pleasure of doing what is not done every day,”³⁴ while the following year the American William Howard rather apologetically cited his “clambering disposition” and “curiosity” as the only reasons for own ascent.³⁵ “Curiosity,” then, frequently served as a way of attempting to justify a potentially risky expedition but its very lack of specificity led to the kind of criticism we have already seen articulated by Postlethwaite in his description of Budworth as “kurious enuff.” In another example, the Alpine historian and travel writer William Coxe gives a detailed account of a dramatic and technically advanced ascent of Mount Titlis, but regrets that the expedition “was only a mere object of curiosity” rather than undertaken for proper scientific reasons.³⁶

The justification of “curiosity” used by all these climbers borders on an understanding of mountaineering as play, though remains just short of it, perhaps as a result of the need to find some sort of justification for a life-threatening activity.

“Curiosity” implies that there remains the possibility of discovery in the activity, even if it is unclear what that discovery may be. In play, however, gratification comes

³³ Edward Baines, *A Companion to the Lakes*, 2nd edition (London: Hurst, Chance and Co, 1830), 203.

³⁴ Count Matzewski, “Letter Addressed to Professor Pictet, Descriptive of Ascents to the Summit of the South Needle of Chamouni, and to that of Mont Blanc”, *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, 4. 20 (Nov, 1818): 182.

³⁵ W. M. Howard, *Narrative of a Journey to the Summit of Mont Blanc* (Baltimore: Fielding Lucas, Jr, 1821), 2.

³⁶ William Coxe, *Travels in Switzerland*, 3 vols (London: T. Cadell, 1789), 1.305.

through the activity itself. In what remains of this essay, I want to argue that though it is never articulated as such, mountaineering was a form of play for many of those who practised it in the Romantic period.

Pride and Pleasure: Mountaineering as Play

The best known cultural versions of the Romantic-period mountaineer, such as Casper David Fredrich's *The Wanderer above the Mists* of 1818 or Lord Byron's account in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* of "He who ascends to mountain-tops,"³⁷ present climbing as a solitary, serious pursuit in which the climber lifts himself above both the earth and the rest of society. However, the vast majority of British mountain ascents in the period were social events, undertaken by "strangers" to a region as part of their tour, and normally led by a local guide. Inns increasingly acted as the organization hub for these climbs, recommending and supplying guides, provisions and sometimes horses or mules for the ascent, as well as accommodation and food before and after. These guided, inn-based summit excursions often involved the formation of larger groups out of the different parties or individuals who wished to make an ascent. John Keats, for example, went up Skiddaw, "with two others, very good sort of fellows,"³⁸ while Paul Hawkins Fisher describes how having made arrangements with a guide to ascend Snowdon the previous night, "Two gentleman joined our party," the group assembling "at the door of the inn about 8 o'clock in the morning."³⁹ While we have seen that some climbers, such as McGillvray, were scornful

³⁷ Lord Byron, *The Oxford Authors*, ed. Jerome J. McGann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 117.

³⁸ John Keats, *Letters of John Keats, A New Selection*, ed. Robert Gittings (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 108.

³⁹ Paul Hawkins Fisher, *A Three Weeks Tour into Wales in the Year 1817* (Stroud: F. Vigurs, 1818), 34.

of the “convivial” parties they encountered on mountain summits, for many the social element inherent within these guided group experiences contributed to the enjoyment of them. Fisher’s party failed to obtain the view from the summit of Snowdon that they had been hoping for, but this was more than compensated for by the conviviality of the climb:

We found the two gentlemen who accompanied us so amusing clever and facetious, that we were hardly (at least not in any painful degree) sensible of the disappointment we had experienced in the object of our expedition; and not withstanding the personal labour it had occasioned, we returned to the inn in safety and good spirits at four o’clock.⁴⁰

While the ostensible object of the expedition has not been achieved, and Fisher continues to see the climb itself as “labour,” the “good spirits” of Fisher’s party suggest it has been an enjoyable group experience and one which conforms to the characteristics of Huizinga’s ideas of play discussed above.

Fisher’s account is particularly interesting because of his recognition of the increasing professionalization of the guides and his suspicion that the inn-based summit ascent has already become a commodity, a package with its own set of rituals designed to create a particular kind of mountain experience for the tourist. He writes that:

I confess that the preparations made and the divisions of the business on this occasion, seemed to me to resemble something intended for

⁴⁰ Fisher, *Three Weeks’ Tour*, 36.

effect; and for investing the ascent of Snowdon with the air of an expedition, and the guide with a kind of professional importance: and yet it is neither safe for strangers to encounter the ascent without a guide, nor quite convenient without provisions.⁴¹

Joseph Hucks, similarly, describes how after his own climbing party had “procured a guide to conduct us to the top of Cader Idris” they “armed him with stores, and warlike preparations of all kinds (to wit): ham, fowl, bread, and cheese, and brandy.”⁴² Fisher’s and Huck’s comments both reveal how the preparatory rituals for a mountain ascent could be used to construct a climb as play, as a “stepping out of ‘real’ life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own.” Both writers are also aware of what Huizinga describes as the “only pretend” or “only for fun” element of their expeditions. Huizinga writes:

This “only pretending” quality of play betrays a consciousness of the inferiority of play compared with “seriousness,” a feeling that seems to be something as primary as play itself. Nevertheless ... the consciousness of play being “only a pretend” does not by any means prevent it from proceeding with the utmost seriousness, with an absorption, a devotion that passes into rapture and, temporarily at least, completely abolishes that troublesome “only” feeling ... The contrast between play and seriousness is always fluid. The inferiority of play is continually being offset by the corresponding superiority of its seriousness. Play turns to seriousness and seriousness to play. (27)

⁴¹ Fisher, *Three Weeks’ Tour*, 34-5.

⁴² Joseph Hucks, *A Pedestrian Tour through North Wales* (London: J. Debrett and J. Edwards, 1795), 113.

Fisher's acknowledgement that the preparations for his group's Snowdon climb "seemed to me to resemble something intended for effect" and Huck's mock-heroic register for describing his own party's "warlike preparations" and "arm[ing]" show that they were both aware of the "only pretending" quality of "play" in their respective expeditions. However, Fisher's account also reveals the fluidity Huizinga identifies between play and seriousness, as he asserts that "it is neither safe for strangers to encounter the ascent without a guide, nor quite convenient without provisions."

Huck's and Fisher's comments also indicate that while much mountaineering was "only pretending," it was pretending to be a particular type of activity. Huck's comically presents his party's activities as martial, involving "warlike preparations" and the "arming" of the guide as if readying him for an epic battle. For Fisher, while the guide and provisions were necessary parts of the tour, the morning's preparations also sought to transform the ascent of Snowdon into something grander than it was, into an "expedition," a term which suggests the heroic contexts of a martial or exploratory undertaking with all its contingent dangers. Here we can see an important development in the history of mountain climbing as the ascent to a summit becomes a commercialized form of recreation through which the participants and consumers can experience excitements and risks that replicate those of the "heroic" pursuits of war and exploration. Through engagement in these mock-expeditions, the participants are also able to play a particular role or perform a particular identity, that of the soldier or the explorer.

Mountaineering as a means of playing a heroic masculine role, akin to the soldier or explorer, is illustrated by the figure of Joseph Dornford, whom we might see

as an embodiment of the playful mountaineer.⁴³ In 1820, Dornford had just finished an MA at Oriel College, Oxford and was “devoting a part of the long vacation to a Continental tour”⁴⁴ when he attached himself to a party led by the Russian scientist Dr Hamel that aimed to climb Mont Blanc. This attempted ascent gained particular notoriety as a result of the death of three guides as the party neared the summit in what can be considered the first major mountaineering disaster. Dornford wrote an account to explain and justify his role in the tragic events, providing an insight into his own motivations. For Dornford, mountaineering enabled participation in a physical activity and the performance and testing of a particular identity, that of a “heroic” masculinity. He shows nothing of the interest in mountain landscapes so central to much of the travel writing of the period and, though he had joined up with Dr Hamel, he didn’t share the physiologist’s scientific interests, writing of his own narrative that “the scientific reader ... will probably rise disappointed from the perusal of this account” and referring such a reader to Hamel’s own pamphlet and to de Saussure’s description of his 1787 ascent (517). In Dornford’s narrative of the climb we can identify a very early articulation of the idea of mountaineering as a challenge or a test, an idea that would become a key trope in writing about the activity but which is normally seen as emerging in the Victorian period.⁴⁵ Dornford particularly conceived the challenge of mountaineering in military terms. As an undergraduate, he had left Trinity College, Cambridge to serve as a volunteer in the Peninsular War and he

⁴³ For a fuller account of Dornford, see my “A ‘Melancholy Occurrence’ in the Alps”.

⁴⁴ J.D., “Mont Blanc: To the Editor of the New Monthly Magazine,” *New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal*, 1 (1821): 452. Further references are contained within parentheses within the text.

⁴⁵ See David Robbins, “Sport, Hegemony and the Middle Class: The Victorian Mountaineers,” *Theory, Culture and Society*, 4 (1987): 579-601; Peter H. Hansen, “Albert Smith, the Alpine Club, and the Invention of Mountaineering in Mid-Victorian Britain,” *The Journal of British Studies*, 34. 3 (Jul 1995): 300-324.

repeatedly represents the Mont Blanc expedition through military terms and figures. This sense of mountaineering as a continuation of, parallel to, and substitute for martial service is seen most clearly when Dornford describes the climbing party setting out:

Our caravan now assumed a most romantic appearance; the costume of the guides, each with a French knapsack, and one or two with pelisses, being decidedly military. It reminded me strongly of a party of Guerillas in the Pyrenees, where uniformity in dress or appointment was considered as an unnecessary refinement. We had each a large straw hat tied under the chin, and a spiked-pole, about eight feet long, in our hands. Besides this, our shoes were furnished with short spikes at the heels to assist us in the descent. We were clothed as lightly as possible, that the motion of our limbs might not be impeded, for we were told to expect a march of eleven or twelve hours, the latter half of which was to be spent in climbing. (453-4)

In Huizinga's terms, Dornford's "caravan" provides his "play-community", a group identity that creates "the feeling of being 'apart together' in an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, of mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms" (31). Dornford's account of his climbing party also reveals that it exemplifies what Huizinga sees as the culminating physical expression of play – dressing up. Huizinga argues that the "differentness" of play is "most vividly expressed in 'dressing up,' in which the 'extra-ordinary' nature of play reaches perfection" (32). For Dornford, the members of his party are united in their difference from the ordinary by the trappings of mountaineering: large hats, spiked poles and

crampons. And this “dressing up” enables Dornford to claim a particular identity: Huizinga writes that “The disguised or masked individual ‘plays’ another part, another being. He *is* another being” (32). As he sets out on his journey to climb Mont Blanc, Joseph Dornford becomes that other being, the “mountaineer,” just like Joseph Budworth, who more than two decades earlier had described himself and Paul ~~Postlethwaite~~~~Partridge~~ as “setting out like hardy mountaineers.”

Dornford saw his attempted ascent of Mont Blanc as a contest with the mountain. Seeing the intimidating route for the first time, he comments that “we felt equal to any thing; and if a thought of the danger of the enterprise crossed the mind, it was only to give an additional zest to the proud consciousness of having a heart that could brave it” (456). For Huizinga too, contest is central to play, and “like all other forms of play, the contest is largely devoid of purpose. That is to say, the action begins and ends in itself” (69). In the playful culture of Romantic-period mountaineering, the climbing of peaks was increasingly seen in this fashion as a contest, both with the mountain itself and with other climbers. As Huizinga writes: “The object for which we play and compete is first and foremost victory” (71); ~~and, One~~ physical testimony to the idea that the ascent of a mountain could be regarded as a victory was the changing landscape of the summits themselves. It was a long established tradition for those reaching the summit of mountains to leave a record by scratching their names and the dates of the climb onto a stone, which was often then added to a summit cairn made of similar stones. Alternatively, successful climbers would write their names on paper and place them in bottles. John Housman in his *A Descriptive Tour, and Guide to the Lakes* of 1800 describes how on Skiddaw “a heap of stones has been raised by the

contribution of one from every visitant, generally with his name and date upon it,"⁴⁶ while in an 1806 account of the ascent of the same mountain, Robert Southey comments that: "They who visit the summit usually scratch their names upon one of the loose stones which form the back to this rude seat."⁴⁷ Southey adds that he feels "how natural and how vain it was to leave behind us these rude memorials." By the 1820s however, these summit memorials were being increasingly criticized due to their scale, their desecrations of the summit landscape, and particularly the motivations of those who had contributed to them. Robert Hasell Newell was acerbic about this culture of self-celebration, writing in 1821 that: "It is amusing to observe the anxiety of the adventurers to record their exploits: scraps of paper are carefully packed among stones at the top, with their names, and the date of their excursion." To reinforce his point, Newell quotes Cowper:

So strong the zeal to immortalize himself
Beats in the breast of man, that e'en a few,
Few transient years, won from th' abyss abhorr'd
Of blank oblivion, seems a glorious prize.⁴⁸

Mountaineering has become a means of seeking satisfaction through achievement.

In Britain, Ben Nevis was the ultimate prize for the mountaineer, the place where, as the guidebook *An Account of the Pleasure Tours in Scotland* (1821) put it, "When the tourist has gained this elevated station, the highest in Britain, he may be really contented with his situation, so far as regards altitude; he has here mankind in

⁴⁶ John Housman, *A Descriptive Tour, and Guide to the Lakes, Caves, Mountains* (Carlisle: F. Jollie, 1800), 121.

⁴⁷ Robert Southey, "Ascent of Skiddaw", *Annual Register*, 1806 (1808), 1029.

⁴⁸ Newell, *Letters on the Scenery of Wales*, 160-1.

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a manner at his feet.”⁴⁹ Climbing Ben Nevis enacts what Huizinga sees as “winning:” “The primary thing is the desire to excel others, to be the first and to be honoured for that” (70). John MacCulloch argued in *The Highlands and Western Isles of Scotland* of 1824 that “From the rarity of fair weather and a cloudless sky at Fort William, and because the distance to the top of Ben Nevis is considerable, and the ascent laborious, it is not often visited.”⁵⁰ -However, this made the sense of achievement in climbing it all the more impressive:

Doubtless, the ascent of Ben Nevis is considered a mighty deed; and, in consequence, there are various names inscribed on the cairn within the plain; while some had been written on scraps of paper, and enclosed in bottles which had been drained of their whisky by the valiant who had reached this perilous point of honour. Such is the love of fame, “that the clear spirit doth raise,” to carve its aspiring initials on desks, and to scratch them on the windows of inns. Is there a man so unworthy of a name, were it even Macguffog or Bumfit, as not to desire that it should be heard of hereafter; even did it prove no more than that its owner had emptied a whisky bottle on Ben Nevis.⁵¹

Despite his ironic and mocking tone, MacCulloch’s illustrates that for many of those “valiants” who undertook it, the climbing of Ben Nevis – the “perilous point of honour” - was a “mighty deed”. He also invokes the language and ideals of chivalry that would become central to Huizinga’s account of play, something that produces “honour,

⁴⁹ *An Account of the Pleasure Tours in Scotland*, 2nd ed., (Edinburgh: John Thomson, 1821), 73.

⁵⁰ John MacCulloch, *The Highlands and Western Isles of Scotland*, 4 vols., (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, Brown and Green, 1824), 1.323.

⁵¹ MacCulloch, *Highlands of Scotland*, 1.323-4.

esteem, prestige" (71). As we shall see, MacCulloch himself was not entirely immune to the pride and pleasure produced by a successful ascent of a challenging climb.

The history of the early ascents of Ben Arthur or "The Cobbler" in Scotland offers a powerful final example of how climbing developed in the Romantic period as a form of play. It illustrates how by the end of the period mountaineering had become a contest with both the mountain and with other climbers, offering the opportunities to overcome a challenge, prove character and gain honour. Ben Arthur had gained a reputation as a difficult summit to reach by the time Thomas Wilkinson felt "a wish to visit the reputed Cobbler" in 1787.⁵² While Wilkinson got close to the top, he did not scale the "two perpendicular rocks, perhaps between fifty and a hundred feet high," which constitute the peak's true summit. In 1804, James Denholm reported that "very few . . . chuse to scale its summit" because the peak "is precipitous and rocky, and the ascent is not only attended with difficulty, but danger."⁵³ Yet it was this sense of challenge that seems particularly to have appealed to John MacCulloch, who made the first known ascent of the precipice of the Cobbler some time between 1811 and 1821, and who locates the ascent of the "precipice" within a historic and heroic tradition:

There is a tradition that the heir of the Campbells of this country, was obliged to seat himself on its loftiest peak, and that, in default of this heroic deed, his lands passed to the next heir. I had no lands to inherit or lose, no tenement but the uncertain lease of a worthless carcass, but was resolved to place it as high as ever did a Campbell. Not,

⁵² Wilkinson, *Tours*, 42.

⁵³ James Denholm, *A Tour to the principal Scotch and English Lakes*, 1804, 39.

however, to boast of more courage than was really my own, I could not shun the honour; for I found myself, unwarily, in that position, common enough in these cases, where it is easier to ascend than to go downwards.⁵⁴

MacCulloch's account highlights another of the characteristics of play that is a particular feature of climbing, the issue of what is "at stake." Huizinga writes that "There is something at stake' – the essence of play is contained in that phrase" (70). For MacCulloch, what is at stake in his ascent is his life, "the uncertain lease of a worthless carcase." Mountaineering is a particularly high-risk form of play, an unsettling aspect of the pursuit, as we have seen from a number of the comments already quoted in this essay. Indeed, it is the high "stake" of mountaineering that for some commentators made it an unjustifiable form of play.

Aware that he was staking his life on the climb, MacCulloch clambered to the summit, which he was surprised to find "so acute and so narrow", comparing it to "the bridge Al Sirat, the very razor's blade over which the faithful are to walk into Paradise." On the summit, MacCulloch experienced the satisfaction that comes through his particular form of play:

I ... found myself astride on this rocky saddle, with one foot in Loch Long and the other in Glencro: in the very position, doubtless, of the bold Campbell's bold heir. There is a pride and a pleasure in surmounting difficulties, even when there is no one present to applaud.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ MacCulloch, *Highlands of Scotland*, 1.254.

⁵⁵ MacCulloch, *Highlands of Scotland*, John MacCulloch, I. 253, 255.

MacCulloch's invocation of absent spectators indicates that he regards his climb as a form of play, which would have brought greater gratification had others been present; as Huizinga writes, "The pleasurable feeling of satisfaction mounts with the presence of spectators, though these are not essential to it." (70) Yet even without such spectators, MacCulloch gains satisfaction through his contest with the mountain's "rocky saddle" and with "Campbell's bold heir". Seated astride the lofty peak of Ben Arthur, having staked his life on the climb, aglow with pride and pleasure, John MacCulloch embodies the development of British mountaineering in the Romantic period as a form of play.