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## **A New Form of Modern Sport: the Beginnings of Lack District Rock-climbing 1880-1914**

### **Mike Huggins**

Between c. 1880 and 1914 the English Lake District played “a central role” in the then innovative and “pioneering” sport of British rock climbing.<sup>1</sup> This emergent activity was beginning to pursue separate paths in locations from Britain to the Alps, Tyrol, Dolomites, Saxony or Canada, as larger social and historical trends reshaped the global ways in which climbers engaged with mountain rock faces. The English Lake District, Snowdonia, and parts of Scotland all attracted rock-climbers, but it was the Lake District which was most commonly represented as the “birthplace” of the sport, the place where “rock climbing was born.”<sup>2</sup> This paper is intended to assist scholars new to British climbing by establishing a frame of reference for rock-climbing as it emerged in the regional context of the Lake District, exploring its key actors and locations, and the multiple discourses surrounding the new sport. While in part synthesising existing populist and academic literature on rock-climbing history,<sup>3</sup> the study draws largely on contemporary climbing journals, books and magazine/newspaper articles, visitors’ lists at local accommodation, and other period sources. It begins by setting the origins of Lake District rock climbing in the wider context of Alpinism, imperialism and the British outdoor movement. It then explains the attractions of the Lake District to early climbers, and the ways in which early rock climbing emerged there from the 1880s as key participants redefined mountaineering, exploiting the landscape to create the innovative rock-climbing challenges which were key to their enjoyment. In so doing it provides rich detail on how the sport extended body limits, developed new climbing techniques and used better equipment. Leading climbers there began to record and measure the standard of climbs,

another innovation. Although mountaineering clubs elsewhere were exclusively male, relegating leading women mountaineers to a marginal role, in the Lakes women rock climbers were able to make some limited impact, and the area's first climbing club, founded in 1907, was open to women. The paper concludes by evaluating the wider significance of the Lake District for British climbing.

### **The Origins of British Rock-climbing: Alpinism and the Outdoors**

Lake District rock-climbing had its roots in early Alpine mountaineering, exploited variously as a middle-class leisure activity, Romantic questing or disinterested scientific enquiry. Rich and leisured early Victorian tourists visiting the Alps drew on the pre-existing appeal of science, middle-class leisure, and Romantic engagement with the sublime and picturesque landscape, exploiting literary descriptions to inform what sociologist John Urry calls their "tourist gaze."<sup>4</sup> Enlightenment scientists examined glaciation, snow slopes and ridges, and altitude phenomena.<sup>5</sup> The Alpine landscape encouraged aesthetic, romantic and religious responses to the natural world, and tourists actively sought out vistas, panoramas and viewpoints, while taking ascents seriously and methodically because of their dangers. Intellectual enjoyment of the outdoors was also coupled with the practical expression of upper-middle-class anti-industrial responses in a more athletic context.

Historians have concentrated on what Klein called the "key transition in alpinism" as climbers experienced the steepness, ecstatic physicality, new technologies, and "modernity" of the discovery of Alpine "vertical landscapes".<sup>6</sup> Early mountaineering reflected Victorian values in combination, increasingly, with a pioneering imperialist spirit. Similar attitudes could be found elsewhere,

in New Zealand for example, characterized by its growing sense of a distinctive colonial character.<sup>7</sup> Mountaineering linked social class, gender, masculinity, imperial culture and the cult of sporting amateurism, and as such came to carry high socio-cultural status and appeal amongst a minority of younger members of Britain's elite. Their embodied experience of climbing mountains became a way of asserting upper-middle-class masculinity.<sup>8</sup>

It was wealthy British men, such as David Forbes, Albert Smith or Alfred Wills, who largely popularised the Alpine "sport" of mountaineering in the 1840s and early 1850s.<sup>9</sup> Club formation was a major feature of their sociability. The exclusive London-based Alpine Club was formed in 1857. Members' experiences were documented in books and in articles in the Club's *Alpine Journal*, begun in 1863, which began as supposedly "a record of mountain adventure and scientific observation,"<sup>10</sup> coupled with what Paul Veyne called "bourgeois character building".<sup>11</sup> Peter Hansen has argued persuasively that members of the Alpine Club displayed "new, more aggressive forms of middle-class gentlemanly culture," and "adopted the language of exploration and adventure," making unclimbed peaks into "representations of British masculinity and imperial conquest." Manliness and athleticism, imperial expansiveness, patriotic and chivalric qualities, and moral or spiritual codes of conduct became linked discursively to British character and prestige.<sup>12</sup> British mountaineers competed largely for "first ascents", with their difficulty, danger, and strenuous physical challenge sometimes but not always allied to discourses of exploration, discovery, and the "conquest" or "defeat" of the natural world, alongside continued elements of Alpine mysticism. Marking some peaks with makeshift flags, they often sought the easiest and safest routes to the top. By 1865 forty major peaks had been ascended by British middle-class amateurs accompanied by local porters or guides.

British Alpine Club members needed relative wealth and significant time away from work to mountaineer abroad, with the professional middle classes playing an important role.<sup>13</sup> Between 1857 and 1890 law, business and teaching occupations dominated its club register, together with the civil service, church, medicine, landowning and military backgrounds.<sup>14</sup> Over 50 per cent had gone to university, and over a third to public schools. There has been some scholarly debate as to whether they were “an intellectual aristocracy”, or a more diverse group of “gentlemanly capitalists”, with a recent study seeing them as the latter.<sup>15</sup> Alpinists dominated other British mountaineering clubs. The Scottish Mountaineering Club (1892) rules ensured it took social as well as mountaineering background on board, asking applicants to list climbs or contributions to science, art, or literature in connection with Scottish mountains.<sup>16</sup> The 1899 Climbers Club was initially composed of Alpinists, Oxbridge members and others from a range of middle-class occupations.<sup>17</sup>

By the 1870s British Alpinists, along with skilful, fit and highly professionalized local guides, had reached all the major Alpine peaks. A widely-held Alpinist view emerged that “the Alps were practically exhausted”, and the “charm of mere nostalgia gone.”<sup>18</sup> By then mountaineering was discursively represented in literature, magazines and the press as a fashionable “modern sport”. In 1884 it was supposedly sufficiently popular that it “no longer requires the apologies and arguments of its votaries to defend its existence, as was requisite only a few years ago.”<sup>19</sup> To extend their experiences, leading mountaineers sometimes travelled further afield, to Canada, Norway and elsewhere. The emphasis shifted from first ascents to searching for more challenging routes to the summit, which began to entail an element of rock climbing. More significantly, although most British Alpinists were dismissive of the climbing potential of British hills, from the 1870s a few members began to

seek a British location to practice mountaineering and build up fitness to climb rock.

### **The Emergence of Cumbrian Rock-climbing**

The Lake District today is a National Park and the largest UK UNESCO World Heritage Site. It is the highest semi-mountainous part of England, in the far north-west, relatively remote, apparently untamed and unindustrialised, with a central area of largely igneous rock, hills, fells and dramatic scenery, with narrow glacially-created lakes radiating out from its centre. It suffers high winds at times, much cloud, and the heaviest annual rainfall in England. Even its highest peaks, such as Scafell Pike, are below 1000 metres above sea level, and its scenic landscape was shaped by complex associations of human and environmental changes. Although expensive in time and money to reach, from the eighteenth century onwards its picturesque and supposedly “natural” aesthetics, visual beauty and mountain scenery attracted and inspired leading British “Romantic” poets, writers, artists and tourists. It became a semi-sacred landscape appealing to a wide variety of cultural values and preferences, as well as to the growing rambling and outdoor movements.

The building of the Furness Railway giving access to the its fringes in the 1860s followed by a line through the central Lakes at Keswick, made the area far more accessible. For growing numbers of the middle classes, physically-demanding tramping, fell walking, and a cultural and vigorously visceral appreciation of the landscape, combining a complex mixture of modern and anti-modern elements, became a way of enjoying a sojourn in the Lakes.<sup>20</sup> As with mountaineering in the Alps, walking and scrambled ascents of local peaks by locals and visitors soon became popular.<sup>21</sup>

Like the Alps it had winter snow, but it also offered potential rock-climbing areas with innumerable deeply-incised ghylls, waterfalls, gullies, buttresses, chimneys, and steep crags, although it lacked the Alps' refuges, huts and chalet-hotels for accommodation.<sup>22</sup> Mountaineering expressed modernity but was expensive and time-demanding. Few could manage a month in the Alps or Tyrol. Many could reach the Lakes. They were near at hand, distances there were short, the place was inexpensive, and climbing was never out of season.

By the 1870s some British Alpinists were beginning to use the limited accommodation in the tiny hamlet at Wasdale Head, close to many of the major peaks and relatively close to the Furness Railway. In the Alpine Club's journal in 1870 the Harrow schoolmaster John Stogdon described step cutting and climbing on a nearby summit, praising his experience as being "as full of interest and beauty as any I remember in the Alps."<sup>23</sup> Initially climbers in Wasdale were focused more on improving their mountain craft rather than rock climbing per se. The Alpinist view was largely that later expressed by Charles Pilkington, a former Alpine Club President, who saw the rocks of the Lake District as useful because they gave "healthy exercise" and cultivated "the power of appreciating the beauties and grandeur of nature". He felt it provided "a good and safe training ground where men may learn and practice nearly all that is necessary in the art of mountaineering."<sup>24</sup>

Wasdale also attracted upper and middle-class urban walkers and hikers from London, Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds, Bradford, the north-east, Scotland, Wales, reading parties from the universities and visitors from abroad, particularly during holiday periods.<sup>25</sup> Their numbers were small, mostly from the Liverpool, Manchester and North Cheshire areas. Their background and attitudes were similar to that of members of the Alpine Club: lawyers, businessmen, engineers, teachers, doctors, and occasionally artists,

photographers and writers. Some were also members of the Alpine Club. Several, including the Hopkinsons (a Manchester family including a mathematician and Cambridge don, a barrister and MP, and a surgeon) and the Pilkingtons (a family who controlled Lancashire collieries and glass works), lived in the wealthy area between Alderley Edge and mid-Lancashire, and were paradoxically famous in the climbing fraternity for their excessive modesty about their climbing successes. Almost all were public school and university-educated.

Over the period from 1880 to 1914 the story of rock climbing became the story of the different ways in which climbing on Lakeland rock offered new challenges to the body and its sense of limits, as rock climbing expanded its various socio-cultural meanings. Climbers began to find ways to meet the new challenge of technical movement on vertical rock rather than ascending snow, scree slopes and fell sides, shifting from the enjoyment of attaining the summit to creating more challenging routes towards it. They began with the apparently safer gullies and chimneys, utilising rudimentary rock technique.

Rock climbing merged new approaches to risk, excitement and adventure with the therapeutic appeal of the outdoor wilderness, ideal for the middle-class professional. It built up independence of thought and self-reliance. The leading Lake District rock-climber of the mid-1890s, Owen G. Jones, loved the feel of climbing in perfect health, with perfect weather, and in a difficult place without danger, seeing it as something that satisfied “the love of the beautiful in nature; the desire to exert oneself physically, which with strong men is a passionate craving.” It also offered “the joy of conquest without any woe to the conquered; the prospect of continual increase in one’s skill.”<sup>26</sup> Others saw the attractions of climbing as developing health and strength in order, according to at least one



climber, to “maintain the British as a healthy race and retain their place at the head of nations”, and so foster their imperial position.<sup>27</sup>

Rock climbing was potentially dangerous and risky, especially once climbers began to tackle longer, technically demanding, wet, slimy or more formidably exposed gullies, rock faces, cracks and chimneys. Gully climbs offered obvious lines of weakness with enclosing walls and wide ledges, though they were wet, cold and covered in soggy, slimy vegetation, with loose rocks and boulders. Technique put premium on physical strength in arms plus drive and scrabbling ability.

Media descriptions of Lake District rock-climbing regularly mentioned its dangers. A short 1884 article written in one London weekly magazine, for example, mentioned climbs “fraught with danger”, “verging on the dangerous”, “difficult and at one point dangerous”, “danger in slipping”, “danger is incurred from falling stones”.<sup>28</sup> Overly-competitive climbing, lack of appreciation of the difficulties and dangers, and tackling difficult climbs with chance companions increased risks. Climbers themselves, however argued that the art of climbing was using prudence and discretion to “reduce that danger to its smallest possible limit”, arguing that danger “depends on the skill of the individual, and can be eliminated if the skill is sufficiently great”.<sup>29</sup> Even so climbers fell, with deaths in 1903 and 1908.

One key figure was Walter Perry Haskett-Smith (1859-1946), a classics scholar and Oxford graduate, later a barrister and philologist, who first visited Wasdale at Easter 1881, at a time when he had no interest in the Alps. From the summer of 1882, with his brother and some local Cumbrian climbers, such as gentleman farmer, estate agent and councillor John Robinson, Haskett-Smith began creating new, more demanding rock climbs, which were soon copied. This marked a mental shift of scale, from peaks to problems - small but difficult

pitches, an approach enjoying not summit ascents but the worthwhile challenge of moving up across rock. This new approach posed new technical challenges, but was, indirectly, a challenge to the philosophy and approach of the Alpinists

Although the numbers involved in rock climbing at this stage were only a few dozen, almost all were well-educated, and all professional or commercial middle-class in background. Their successful development of new techniques placed the Alpine Club members under threat. They were being out-climbed. In 1886, writing in the *Alpine Journal*, the Alpinist and leading climber in Norway, William Cecil Slingsby, scion of a Yorkshire landowning family with textile interests, who had visited Wasdale in 1885 for the first time, described a Scafell route and pleaded to his fellow members: "Do not let us be beaten on our own fells by outsiders...Let us not neglect the Lake District, Wales and Scotland when we are conquerors abroad." Haskett-Smith, as he pointed out, had done "much brilliant rock climbing," but, and his words rang out in warning, he was "not in our club."<sup>30</sup> To be fair, Slingsby, like other Lakeland climbers, although he mixed socially largely with others of his background, was by no means exclusive in his own approach to climbing.

His call to pay more attention to British rock, however, went largely ignored. Most members of the Alpine Club had their eyes firmly fixed on more exclusive foreign mountaineering. Climbing in England was still low in status. When Haskett-Smith contributed an article to the *Alpine Journal* in 1892 on climbing in Cumberland, he sounded apologetic, guilty about mentioning such minor matters, admitting that "it may well be thought a hopeless task to interest the members of the Club in such an everyday matter as the English fells", and that many members "would not believe that any pleasure can be got out of climbing at only two or three thousand feet above the sea." He recommended the Lakes because "there are few places where gully climbing...can be more

readily learned”, thus implicitly a good preparation for “real” Alpine work. He accepted that such climbs were “not epics”, but made the point, pithily and wittily, that they were “smart and stimulating epigrams.”<sup>31</sup>

Over the next few years British rock climbing slowly developed its new approaches and techniques, increasingly contrasting with the more traditional thinking of the older Alpine Club members. The same year that Slingsby wrote his letter, Haskett-Smith moved away from the gullies to ascend a spectacular freestanding rock pillar, Napes Needle, solo-climbing it with no companions and no climbing aids.<sup>32</sup> Technically exposed, it demanded crack climbing, an easy slab, an awkward mantle-shelf move, and small holds on an open face. Eminently photographic, later climbing writers saw the Needle’s photographic image as a powerful iconic symbol of the climbing challenges of the Lake District.<sup>33</sup> It was displayed in London photographic shops, and given prominence in the occasional climbing feature in the London press. *The Globe*, for example, claimed it in 1901 as “considered by many climbers as one of, if not the most difficult climb in the Lake District”.<sup>34</sup> Reproduced in magazines, newspapers and books, and portrayed on hotel walls, it became a powerful, sexually-charged image, capturing the *zeitgeist*, attracting the touristic as well as sporting gaze, with male figures sat on its summit, although many women soon climbed it. Like the language of the “conquest” of “virgin rock”, it simultaneously advertised assertive masculinity, rock-climbing and the Lake District, an object of aspiration, drawing in new, adventurous climbers, such as Norman Collie, who saw the image in the *Pall Mall Budget* in 1890.<sup>35</sup>

The climb, and the image, also moved climbing on. The solicitor Godfrey Solly, an Alpinist introduced to Lakeland rock by Slingsby in the 1880s, saw it as marking the birth of “modern British mountaineering.”<sup>36</sup> Haskett-Smith himself became known as “the father” or “the first English pioneer” of rock climbing.<sup>37</sup>

The Needle was the most significant short climb thus far, exposed but technically undemanding. None of Haskett-Smith's climbs were individually severe but their collective contribution was to push forward the limits of the possible. He went out to find and master new rock routes, increasingly now climbing on the open faces of the great slabs and buttresses, just for fun, sometimes solo and usually without rope. Other Alpinists such as Solly, Carr (from a Kendal biscuit-making family) and Slingsby began tackling ridges and slabs too. In the early 1890s, Dr. Joseph Collier, a Manchester surgeon who had climbed in the Alps and Caucasus, joined them.

The combination of chimney, crack, slab and buttress climbing offered more challenge. Rock climbing was becoming more exposed and dangerous, and very demanding of strength and endurance, especially in the bitter cold, mist, snow and ice of a Cumbrian winter or early spring. But the numbers of climbers slowly grew, and the proportion of Alpinists in the Lakes declined. From 1895 the leading figure was Owen G. Jones (1867-1899), a London schoolmaster, very self-centred, whose climbs were more daring and dangerous than those before him, even though he still took Alpine climbing as a standard.<sup>38</sup> Jones was one of a new breed of rock climbers who drew on the late Victorian boom in gymnastics and the physical fitness movement, and on the balance-climbing techniques on boulders Oscar Eckenstein and others were beginning to discuss.<sup>39</sup> He took risks, and fell several times, sometimes six or seven metres, but his rope held him. His 1897 book attracted climbers to spend their time on the rocks of Cumberland just as early Alpine works had acted as a mountaineering magnet to the Alps.<sup>40</sup>

Though etiquette demanded that Jones overtly employed the rhetoric of amateurism he was quite clearly quietly but keenly competitive. He took physical fitness seriously, training with gymnastic exercises, used weights and dumbbells to build up arm strength, and had abnormal finger power. He used to

time his climbing and continually tried to improve his performance. His main years at Wasdale were on intermittent short holidays between 1890 and 1899, when he died in a climbing accident in Switzerland. His ascent of Kern Knotts Crack in 1897 was another move forward in terms of its technical challenge and exposure. From the beginning he kept a detailed diary of all his routes. He often spent Christmas and Easter at Wasdale, and climbed in the Alps in the summer. At Wasdale Jones climbed with a number of companions, including the Hopkinson families and Abraham brothers. Soon such climbers were commonly describing themselves as “cragmen.” Godfrey Solly pushed a really demanding route on Great Gable. The major shift from challenging routes up cracks on rock faces to moves onto the slabs and walls came in 1903, when Fred Botterill put up a demanding slab climb on Scafell Crag, leading out 120 feet with no rope protection, a move paralleled in Saxony with the climb of Locomotive Esse. That year however four experienced men were killed in a climbing accident on Scafell. This temporarily inhibited climbing standards, although Siegfried Herford, a very accomplished climber, who even practiced jumping onto rocks to help him cope with falls, put up some outstanding Lakeland routes just before the First World War, well ahead of prevailing British standards.<sup>41</sup>

In the 1880s and 1890s there were still very few rock climbers. Most good climbers turning up at Wasdale and elsewhere were known to each other, although they would encourage other fit visitors to join them. In the decade leading up to the First World War, there were fewer new routes in the Lakes, and the focus of British climbing moved more to the Welsh and Scottish cliffs. At the same time, the number of middle-class participants grew as the sport gained wider appeal, and a larger proportion of climbers showed limited interest in Alpine experiences. By the 1890s, one leading British mountaineer was already bemoaning that “as most people interested in mountaineering are

aware, the modern tendency all in favour of rock – climbing”.<sup>42</sup> The editor of the 1892 Badminton book on *Mountaineering* likewise admitted that “of the various branches of mountaineering rock-climbing is undoubtedly at present the most popular, a more exciting branch.”<sup>43</sup> England did not have mountains like the Alps. Its rocks were accessible to a rising middle class. By 1895 the *Globe* newspaper was describing what it termed an “odium alpinum”, a new and disputatious discursive rivalry between Alpinist “old buffers” (“mountaineers proper”) and the “cragmen”, “shin-scrapers” or “mountain gymnasts” of the new sport.<sup>44</sup>

Many such “cragmen” took short holidays in the Lakes at Easter, Whitsuntide or summer, staying at guesthouses, such as teetotal Row Farm, others at the Wastwater Hotel, where up to 60 climbing enthusiasts might gather at long vacation periods. By the 1920s the hotel advertised itself as “The Switzerland of the British Isles and The Mecca of the Climber and Mountaineer.” A few stayed nearby: at local farms, Langdale, Coniston or Seatoller.

Despite being individualistic and more freely-organised, and resistant to the elite Alpine model of club formation, there was a steady repurposing of elite cultural models. Associativity pressures meant that Lake District climbers, often drawn from the regional middle classes, eventually formed their own club, the Fell and Rock Climbing Club, in 1907. It offered facilities for cultivating friendships, and opportunities to render mutual assistance in the enjoyable exercise of sport “over our delightful Northern playground,” with the avowed aim of being “a purely local Club, organised, officered, and managed mainly by men residing within its own borders”.<sup>45</sup> To an extent it drew on regional loyalty and pride. The vast majority of its officers came from the Lake Counties. Westaway has argued that the membership denoted a wider sense of ‘northern-ness’. In 1907 the vast bulk of its members came from the north-

west. Although the next year over half of new members came from elsewhere, sixty-per cent of new members elected in 1909 were from northern English counties.<sup>46</sup> George Abraham, writing in 1907, said that climbing was attractive to “all sorts and conditions of men. The love of mountains makes the whole world kin.”<sup>47</sup>

### Extending Body Limits: New Techniques and Equipment

Across the Dolomites, Saxony and the Lakes men were finding new ways of moving in a vertical plane as more “technologically advanced and self-consciously modern” techniques developed.<sup>48</sup> In the Lakes, standards rose in part through a combination of better balance techniques, using hands simply for balance, and training to achieve more physical strength in the fingers and arms. Climbers wanted to be physically stretched, and meet demanding body challenges. By the later 1880s jamming in cracks, lay-backing and other basic methodology were well understood. But climbing conventions had not yet developed far. Norman Collie, the Scottish lecturer and later professor of Organic Chemistry at London University, who climbed in the Lofotens, the Canadian Rockies, Himalayas and the Alps as well as Britain, simply cut a step in some rock with an ice axe to help a crux move near Wasdale Head without any subsequent complaint, although he later described this as a “*mauvais pas*”, and apologetically said “*Peccavi*: I take the blame.”<sup>49</sup> Most climbers throughout Europe used what they called “combined” “tactics” or “methods”, helping each other up with the assistance of hands, shoulders or even heads right to 1914. Oppenheimer reported using a friend’s shoulder on a Buttermere climb in 1907 to reach a hold, when on a weekend FRCC visit with eight Club members and three women climbers, and according to G. O. Sansom, describing an ascent of

the Flake on Central Buttress, his friend Herford “used my shoulders to help him.”<sup>50</sup> Climbing was still seen as a team enterprise, most often for two men, sometimes for three or four, and combination and physical support was seen as legitimate.

Amateurs supposedly did not practice but the gymnastic strength of O. G. Jones suggests significant attention to training, and this was increasingly accepted. The English rock-climber and railway engineer Oscar Eckenstein, who climbed in the Lakes with the Abraham brothers as well as in Wales and the Alps practiced with one arm chin ups to develop arm strength and used boulder problems to develop his balance climbing skills. By 1909, Benson, in *British Mountaineering*, was recommending readers to go to a gymnasium or hang off a staircase or mantelpiece to build up finger strength.<sup>51</sup>

Equipment was minimal and simple, in everyday use and un-specialised. In the 1880s long fell poles were still being carried, to help balance, but most soon dispensed with them. The early Alpinists imported the long four-foot ice axe, often used for assistance even in summer. It was sometimes used for hacking steps in rock or as an artificial hold in cracks. More importantly it was used for “gardening” (removing grass, moss, birds’ nests, roots, stumps and loose rock and improving doubtful holds), and gradually Lake District rock faces changed. Clothes worn were generally of the everyday type: strong, sensible old suits, though the Norfolk jacket was often used because it had deep pockets, and these were not waterproof. Trousers were usually of the knickerbocker type, with baggy knees. Stout, heavy, clumsy leather boots were initially used and by 1886 Haskett-Smith and others used stout country shoes with a scattering of hobnails. Alpinists often recommended the Alpine climbing boot.<sup>52</sup> But with the shift from arm strength to balance climbing, more boot nails were needed,<sup>53</sup> and by the 1890s George Abraham, a leading climber of his



generation, had developed boots with outside and inside rows of nails, which held on small holds. When more gripping was necessary some took off their boots and climbed in socks. Rucksacks were often carried.

Rope techniques were primitive, emulating the Alpinists, who used the technique of climbing gullies at the same time if in threes, all roped together and supporting with the rope directly, not belaying, a practice fraught with potential danger. The Alpine hemp rope was probably first used in the Lakes for rock climbing in 1885 by Robinson and Seatree, and was 1.5 inches in circumference, and usually eighty feet or less in length. In the 1880s Haskett-Smith “heretically” argued that rope use was problematic, since it encouraged bad climbers to attempt too-challenging routes. This was part of his wider rejection of much of the approach and equipment of the Alpinists. As Slingsby with some puzzlement complained, Haskett-Smith was one of those who “consider ice axes and ropes to be illegitimate.”<sup>54</sup> But Haskett-Smith too was soon using them. Initially a rope was simply dangled from above down the line of ascent. However, roping together was soon standard. By the later 1880s ropes were also used to lower climbers to survey possible new rock routes, and by 1895 Jones used a top rope to clear plants and moss from future climbs, and practice difficult (crux) moves.

From the later 1890s onwards better rope techniques of support were slowly developed: leaders putting the rope over a flake of rock to belay or threading the rope round jammed stones on the way up when leading for greater protection. Leaders still sometimes simply stood and braced themselves to support colleagues with the rope in their hands, though slow recognition came that useful hitches could be got over jutting pieces of rock. But even in the early 1900s, when protection techniques were increasingly discussed, following increased fatalities, there was agreement that “the rope is the emblem of the union between members of the party.” There was guidance about belaying

support for the lead climber, but actual details of belaying techniques were still somewhat vague, with a “belaying pin” defined as “anything upon which the rope can be hung in order to sustain weight”, and some limited information available about use of roping, knots, rope care and climbing positions for support.<sup>55</sup> Second climbers sometimes doubled the rope over a protruding rock for support when descending in case they fell, though this could perhaps have severed the rope. By 1909 Claude Benson had recognised that it was good practice that the leader should “belay himself to the rock”, but claimed that “this was seldom practical” and “not generally known.” With climbers’ deaths becoming an issue, the Climbers’ Club supplied a stretcher and first aid equipment to the Wasdale Hotel in 1903.<sup>56</sup> The challenges of rock climbing pushed progress on fast and by the early 1920s even Alpinists like Solly conceded that in the case of British rock-climbers, “their knowledge of the management of ropes and belays was excellent”, and that “they know more of ropes and outfit than Alpinists.”<sup>57</sup>

### **Recording and Measuring the Standards of Climbs.**

Alan McNee has argued that late Victorian mountaineering was moving away from earlier notions of the sublime to a ‘haptic sublime’, the tactile embodied experiences and physical sensations of the human body while climbing, using strength, balance, agility and pressure on rock faces. This embodied a distinctly modern approach to mountain climbing and mountain aesthetics. This embodiment, McNee suggests, encouraged a characteristically Victorian drive to enumerate, codify, and classify, using the body as an instrument of measure in relation to recording and measuring the standards of rock climbs.<sup>58</sup> Such approaches were soon found in the Lakes.

Initially rock climbers struggled to find current information about existing routes on rock, to improve their standard or create new routes. There were few details of the rock-climbing approach to movement, techniques and crux points. Alpinist publications focused largely on British summits, not rock faces. C.T. Dent, the editor of *Mountaineering* (1892), gave guidance only on snow and ice practice, mountaineering without guides, and hill climbing in Britain.<sup>59</sup> Haskett-Smith's 1894 book on British climbing still had little information on individual climbs, though it focused almost entirely on the Lake District.<sup>60</sup> By then however there was increasing demand for climb-grading, and even the *Alpine Journal*, disparaging "this little work", complained of its "want of classification".<sup>61</sup>

Information was passed on initially by word of mouth, or by writing new routes in the various hotel visitors' books, using the language of conquest and exploration, and using the Alpine Club phrasing of "First Ascents." The first visitors' book at the Huntsman's Inn to mention climbing dates from 1863. There are later ones with climbing references dating from 1879 to 1885, 1884 to 1891, 1894 to 1901 and 1902 to 1904.<sup>62</sup> Further books from 1876-1886 survive for the Row Farm Guest House.<sup>63</sup>

Jones attempted to formalise a guide to standards in his 1897 book *Rock Climbing in the English Lake District*, providing some schematic diagrams of routes for the new English climbers now drawn there. He was also the first to adjectivally grade climbs he described from Easy, Moderate and Difficult to Exceptionally Severe. This meant that following climbers knew what was already possible. Increased details of verticality, degree of exposure and length were soon included. For members of the Fell and Rock Climbing Club, its annual journal and its club's Climbing Book/Club Record Books regularly focused on particulars of new climbs with gradings, also sometimes assessing the margin of

safety. George and Ashley Abraham, who had a family photography business in Keswick and began climbing routes in the early 1890s, contributed photographs, often taken with heavy portable cameras from difficult stances, which created a visual library of what climbers and other customers wanted to see and feel. George Abraham believed that the popularity of British climbing owed much to their and other photographs of the Napes Needle.<sup>64</sup> Several leading figures such as the Abrahams or Slingsby were keen proselytisers, giving talks to local literary, geographical and scientific organisations, institutes and church audiences on Lake District climbing. The Abrahams brought out books about their climbing exploits, and these, along with the sales of their climbing photographs, helped create a modernist aesthetics for the embryonic sport.<sup>65</sup> Such mountaineering photographs had contemporary parallels such as those produced and consumed in the Canadian Rocky and Selkirk mountains between 1880 and 1920.<sup>66</sup>

### **The Role of Gender Relationships in Cumbrian Rock-Climbing**

Gender relations are of fundamental importance in many sports, as recent studies have shown.<sup>67</sup> Many sports were dominated by various forms of hegemonic masculinity, a multi-faceted identity, associated with heterosexual aggressive competition, physical size and strength.<sup>68</sup> Victorian mountaineering has been discursively represented as a masculine practice, placing a new emphasis on physical strength and health, and a spirit of rivalry, all conveying manly representations, where women's subordination was naturalised. Some climbers in homo-social contexts exhibited the same sorts of hearty sporting enthusiasm found in public-school athleticism. When the climbing fraternity took over the Wasdale Hotel during Christmas, Easter or Whitsuntide behaviour some might quietly discuss and plan but others, the more boisterous and ebullient, might compete for one-arm pullups in the bar, test their

gymnastic ability, or traverse all around the billiard room without touching the floor.

Feminist scholars have opened up ways of thinking about and knowing women's contributions to and experiences of sport histories and organizations. As their recent research-based studies of women mountaineers have shown, the women sometimes challenged male attitudes, though usually climbing with men, only rarely climbing on their own or with other women.<sup>69</sup> How far was this true of early Lake District rock-climbing? This was a period when, as Tosh has shown, the suffragist movement and emergence of the "New Woman" strongly challenged earlier notions of masculine hegemony, while simultaneously domesticity was becoming less appealing to middle-class Englishmen.<sup>70</sup> It was a period where masculinity was in a culturally pervasive feeling of crisis, becoming a rather unstable, fluid and shifting construction. For some men, an attraction with adventure seems to have culminated in a "flight from domesticity", and an emphasis on courage and stoicism. Many of the climbers mentioned in the visitors' books were in their twenties and thirties and married with families but staying in the Lakes on their own. Their published writings show little sense of emotional vulnerability, or their intimate inner lives, even when climbing exerted a deeply personal and emotionally-charged appeal. There were certainly close male friendships, or strong male climbing teams formed while there. Yet the term "manliness" was never a focus of their early twentieth-century climbing texts, and masculinity was at best a tacit theme, while some men certainly adopted a more inclusive form.

Feminist theory shows that sports like rock-climbing with aspects of danger and risk are usually defined as masculine.<sup>71</sup> But the extent to which the Lakes rock climbing was defeminised can be exaggerated. Several local male

climbers were very supportive of women's involvement. The land-agent and farmer John Robinson had been 'a local pioneer, adept, and leader', 'a crack Cumbrian cragsman' through the 1890s and was regarded as very supportive, having led almost forty women to the top of the Pillar Rock, with its demanding scrambling and climbing, during his climbing career.<sup>72</sup> William Cecil Slingsby, another leading figure in the early twentieth century, often climbed with women himself, and praised male rock climbers who supported their female counterparts.<sup>73</sup>

By the 1890s the exhibition of women's sporting physicality, whilst not always approved of was more frequent. From its beginnings in 1890 the Wastwater Hotel visitors' books sometimes recorded women's "first ascents", including an ascent of Napes Needle by a Miss Koecher. Most, but not all, were climbing in close physical proximity to men, and were wives, girl-friends or daughters of male climbers. In late August 1896, for example Miss Southall's ascents of Moss Ghyll and Eagle's Nest Arrete were recorded as "what is believed to be the second lady's ascent" and "1st lady's ascent" respectively, accompanied by four men. The following month Miss Evelyn Spence Watson made the first recorded descent of North Climb on Pillar Rock.<sup>74</sup> Mrs Nettleton led Kern Knots Crack only a year after Jones's first ascent.

Men expected to lead climbs, so women found it difficult to gain experience in leading, and mastering route finding, technique, or responsibility. Though women generally climbed with men, some were clearly adept climbers and did occasionally climb independently, challenging female proprieties. Emily (Martha) Kelly, a graceful and bold balance climber, was capable of soloing Owen Glynn Jones' route up Deep Ghyll on Scafell, and later was a key figure in founding the first dedicated rock-climbing club for women, The Pinnacle Club, in 1920.<sup>75</sup> In 1907, at a "ladies' week" at Wasdale, Anne and Evelyn Seatree

climbed at least sixteen routes together. Male expectations of women climbers were often linked to the wearing of long skirts and female body image as well as climbing ability. After watching them one leading male member of the FRCC, commented: “a man hates a mannish woman, but when a slight girl equals him at his favourite sport, and yet retains her womanliness, he readily admits her claim to a place on the rope and admires her greatly”, even when conceding “feelings of admiration, perhaps occasionally tinged with a little envy, [when] a privileged few watched the ease with which they recently waltzed up some of the stiffest climbs around Wastdale.”<sup>76</sup>

The Alpine Club, the Climbing Club and other leading British climbing clubs of the time were limited to males, as were all the climbing clubs elsewhere in Europe. But in the Lake District rock-climbing community women played a rather more significant role. Its Fell and Rock Climbing Club welcomed women members from its foundation, charging them £5 instead of £7. Of new members in 1908, eleven per cent were women, though none were committee officials.<sup>77</sup> A few contributed to its journal. This was impressive, though less so than the Alpine Club of Canada where about a third of members were women, with a lady Secretary, a lady Editor, and other ladies on the committee.<sup>78</sup>

Initially only men attended the Club’s annual dinner, but by the Fourth Annual Dinner it boasted of a further “unique feature in climbing annals—the presence of ladies at the Annual Dinner of a British Mountaineering Club”. Fourteen out of eighty-six attenders were women, including one speaker who neatly reminded her audience that as well as climbing, women also supported men by repairing clothes and oiling boots.<sup>79</sup> While in reports of the dinners, women appear to have received what one called a “hearty welcome”, in 1912 Miss E.M. Eckhard pointed out to the attenders that while the men had a generation start of them. for agility or knowledge of the problems in front, the

woman was often the equal of the man, “yet she never is allowed to take the initiative or even to think for herself.”<sup>80</sup>

### **The Wider Significance of the Lake District for British Climbing**

It was in the Lake District in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, that the nascent sport of rock climbing became a significant example of a more modern British adventure sport. The early pioneers there helped to create its ethical and technical bases. It was an innovative form of modern “adventure” sport, extending Alpine mountaineering by creating a “modernist” shift to movement on rock rather than earlier “first summit ascents”. It redefined, and extended the limits of, the “self-testing and challenge seeking” which Britain’s earlier Alpine mountaineers had explored.<sup>81</sup> It met new bodily, technical and cultural challenges, probing the limits to embodied strength and mind more robustly and less reflectively, finding routes on demanding, more exposed rock.

Rock climbers transformed the sport first by shifting its focus from pseudo-Alpinist snow and ice climbing up gullies towards crags and rock faces, whilst also meeting the challenges of Lake District weather, and coping with the psychological challenge and the risks and dangers of moving on rock. They began to record the standards of climbs and provided measures that allowed their difficulties to be assessed. Many had no desire to climb in the Alps. New technologies of rope use and equipment helped to meet climbing challenges and as techniques emerged to use them more effectively climbing moved forwards. Most importantly, though climbing was still dominated by middle-class, well-educated professional men, who on the surface adopted an amateur non-competitive rhetoric, talking about the aesthetic, social and romantic aspects of



the sport, at its leading edge the top climbers were intensely competitive, and it was this that moved the sport forward.

The leading Alpinists of the late nineteenth century increasingly acquired Lake District climbing techniques. Alfred Mummery, who climbed mainly in the Alps and Caucasus, was widely accepted as the most pioneering and radical British mountaineer of his generation when he died climbing in the Himalayas in 1895. He had been a leading figure in re-visioning mountaineering as having at its heart the struggle and overcoming of challenging difficulties, rather than just new summit ascents, he emphasised 'guideless climbing', focused on rock routes, and rather looked down on those 'precious individuals', the more traditional, chronically conservative amongst Alpine Club members. Mummery climbed regularly with Slingsby, Collie and Hastings, all of whom had gained substantial experience in the Lakes.<sup>82</sup>

Indeed, from the beginning of the 1900s the rock-climbing focus was moving away from the Lake District. With a levelling out of standards, and the increased stress on safety stressed both in the aims of the new Club and speeches of its leading officials, new routes were becoming harder to find, and competition fell away. By the end of the first decade of the twentieth century British climbers were taking their skills to areas like Glencoe, Ben Nevis or north Wales to find new routes and more advanced and difficult climbs.

Unknown to most British climbers, in Saxony, Dr. Oscar Schuster, Albert Kunze, the lawyer Rudolf Fehrmann and American Oliver Perry-Smith, who was studying at a technical university in Dresden, were key figures amongst those pushing the limits of rock climbing on the long, exposed and sustained sandstone climbs, using rope-soled slippers for grip.<sup>83</sup> Even in 1903 there were perhaps five hundred active climbers in the area. In 1908 Fehrmann published a climbing guide, *Der Bergsteiger in der Sächsischen Schweiz*, detailing a number

of climbs much more challenging than those currently in the Lake District, although the enigmatic, complex, young aeronautical researcher Siegfried Herford's lead of the Flake Pitch of Scafell Buttress in 1914, the most challenging in Britain at the time, was of similar standard. German and Austrian climbers in the Eastern Alps were also bringing in new safety aids. In 1910 Otto Herzog developed the first steel karabiner to be clipped onto a new form of piton with a hole in it. The piton could be inserted into the rock, and a safety rope run through the karabiner. Over the next few years Hans Dülfer developed more effective belay devices, and rappelling upwards as a way of moving along rope. It took some time for such knowledge to reach Britain. As late as 1913, when Herford and Sansom visited the Dolomites to climb and observe the "methods of the German school of cragsmen" they described it as "terra incognita" to British climbers.<sup>84</sup> The Lakes was no longer at the leading edge of climbing.

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<sup>2</sup> Alan Hankinson, *The First Tigers: The Early History of Rock Climbing in the Lake District* (London: Dent, 1972), 2, 32–6; Simon Bainbridge, “Writing from ‘the perilous ridge: Romanticism and the Invention of Rock Climbing,” *Romanticism* 19, no. 3 (2013): 246-60.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. Simon Thompson, *Unjustifiable Risk? The Story of British Climbing* (Milnthorpe: Cicerone, 2010); Ian Thompson, *The English Lakes: A History* (London: Bloomsbury, 1912); Hankinson, *The First Tigers*; Westaway, “Origins of Mountaineering”.

<sup>4</sup> John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies* (London: Sage, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> Caroline Schaumann, *Peak Pursuits: The Emergence of Mountaineering in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Kerwin L. Klein, “A Vertical World: The Eastern Alps and Modern Mountaineering,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 24 (4) 2011/2: 519-548

<sup>7</sup> Lee Davidson, “The ‘spirit of the hills’: Mountaineering in Northwest Otago, New Zealand, 1882-1940,” *Tourism Geographies* 4, no. 1 (2002): 44-61.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Gilchrist, “Introduction to Gender and British Climbing Histories,” *Sport in History* 33, no.3 (2013): 223-235.

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- <sup>17</sup> "Climbers Club AGM 28<sup>th</sup> April 1899," *Climbers Club Journal* 1, no. 4 (1899): 145-151
- <sup>18</sup> C. E. Matthews, speech at Climbers' Club A.G.M., *Climbers' Club Journal* 6, no.23 (1904): 139.
- <sup>19</sup> Burnley Express 9 February 1884.
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<sup>26</sup> Owen G. Jones, *Rock Climbing in the English Lake District* (1897, reprinted Didsbury: E J Morten, 1973), 1.

<sup>27</sup> *Journal of the Fell and Rock Climbing Club (Henceforth JFRCC)* 1, no.3 (1907):106.

<sup>28</sup> 'The Climbs of the English Lake District Part II', *All the Year Round* 35, no.8 (1884):111ff.

<sup>29</sup> Pilkington, "Hill Climbing in the British Isles," 360; "The Climbs on Scafell Pinnacle," *JRFCC* 2, no.3 (1912): 301.

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<sup>38</sup> Birkett, *Lakeland's Greatest Pioneers*.

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<sup>60</sup> W. P. Haskett-Smith, *Climbing in the British Isles Vol I England* (London: Longmans Green, 1894).

<sup>61</sup> *Alpine Journal* 17, (1895): 284.

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<sup>68</sup> Raewyn Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, 'Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept', *Gender and Society* 19, (2004): 829–59

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