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Mountains, Therapy and the Peripatetic Writing Space; Elizabeth Le Blond in France and Switzerland in the 1880s

Abstract

In her 1886 mountaineering memoir, *High Life and Towers of Silence*, Elizabeth Le Blond writes of re-visiting places of adventure in her writing: 'I have derived much enjoyment from the labour of writing [the book], and have felt some of the old pleasure of the excursions come back' (194). For Le Blond, the Swiss mountains were a therapeutic space where she went to recover from tuberculosis, and also a place in which she wrote and remembered her celebrated climbing career. This chapter focusses on Le Blond's French and Swiss mountaineering texts published between 1883 and 1886, and argues that the peripatetic writing space may be one of memory and therapy and responds to scholarship such as that by Forsdick (2015, 2019) which calls for attention to be paid to the corporeal in writing about mobility. The focus of the chapter will be on the ways in which Le Blond describes the mountain spaces, and through this discussion I suggest that these spaces of bodily recovery were also spaces of inspiration and female empowerment through writing.

Biography

Kathryn Walchester is Reader and Subject Leader for English Literature at Liverpool John Moores University. She has published widely on women's European travel in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, northern travel and mountaineering. Her publications include *Gamle Norge* and *Nineteenth-Century British Women Travellers and Norway* (Anthem, 2014), *Travelling Servants: Mobility and Employment in British Fiction and Travel Writing 1750-1850* (Routledge, 2019), and *Keywords for Travel Writing Studies: A Critical Glossary*, co-edited with Charles Forsdick and Zoë Kinsley (Anthem 2019).

In the preface to her 1883 mountaineering memoir *The High Alps in Winter; or, Mountaineering in Search of Health*, Elizabeth Le Blond describes her first attempts at climbing in the Alps:

> In the summer of 1881 I came to Chamonix for the first time. I arrived there in bad health. As for mountaineering, I knew nothing of it, and cared less. However, after a fortnight spent in the fresh mountain air, I was, one day, induced by some friends to accompany them to Pierrepointue. The weather was fine, the glacier above looked inviting, Miss H– – and I continued to Grand Mulets. The excursion did not tire me, and a week later I returned there to ascend Mont Blanc. (*The High Alps in Winter* v)

Although she was unable to climb Mont Blanc the following week due to bad weather, Le Blond did go on to spend the remainder of the season and the following winter climbing in the region. Despite her casual entry into mountaineering, 'induced by friends', which recalls the apologies frequently placed at the beginnings of texts by women writers during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Le Blond went on to have both a celebrated climbing career and to publish eight books about her mountain adventures between 1883 and 1907. Le Blond's first modest references to her climbing prowess are soon eschewed in her writing however. She draws attention to her standing in the world of mountaineering even in this first text with the subtitle under name on the title page, 'Membre Club Alpin Français, Section du Mont Blanc'.[i] Le Blond's reference to herself as a member of the French Alpine club would have had increased resonance for English readers as the Alpine Club in Britain did not admit female members, and in 1907, Le Blond was to become president of the newly-formed Lyceum Club, later the Ladies' Alpine Club (Hansen 2). In the preface to *The High Alps in Winter*, Le Blond also highlights her former ill health, apparently cured by the air in

the Alps. In an obituary in *The Alpine Journal* in 1934, Leslie Stephen, writes, 'In early youth Mrs. Le Blond was delicate, and for this reason was sent to the Alps. This was somewhere about 1879. She soon recovered, and henceforth up to about 1900 became an industrious and indefatigable mountaineer' (Stephen 383). Le Blond had been diagnosed as having consumption by her doctor after the birth of her only son in the winter of 1880.

This chapter focuses on three of Le Blond's mountaineering memoirs: *The High Alps in Winter; or Mountaineering in Search of Health* (1883); *High Life and Towers of Silence* (1886); and *My Home in the Alps* (1892). It demonstrates how, in these texts, both the mountains and the act of writing about the mountain environment is shown to be therapeutic. Le Blond's descriptions of the Alps suggest furthermore, that these spaces of bodily recovery were also spaces of inspiration and empowerment through writing. The first section of the chapter discusses Le Blond's account of her challenge to the advice of doctors both in terms of her own health and subsequently that of other visitors she encounters during her time in the region. The second section focuses on Le Blond's descriptions of the mountain spaces and her expression of the empowerment which she feels through her physical effort in this environment. It draws on Le Blond's representation of two aspects of the mountain air identified in this preface to her first text, its pureness for breathing and its clarity for viewing, both aspects which become symbolic of Le Blond's recovery and her later success.

Curing Ill-Health in the Mountains

As Le Blond describes in her autobiography, *Day In, Day Out,* she was sent by doctors to a succession of health resorts by way of trying to cure her respiratory condition, which had been identified as consumption, one of the nineteenth-century terms for tuberculosis. In the first instance, these were resorts which were associated with warm, sea air, such as resorts on the south coast of France, a stay at which had been advocated for patients with pulmonary

complaints from the end of the eighteenth century (Russo 201; Chard 179-201; Kevan 118). As Heini Hakosalo describes in his account of the treatment of three cases of tuberculosis during the nineteenth century, the complex nature of the disease and its similarity to other complaints meant that,

> Tuberculosis provided an especially lucrative sub-section of the medical market. It was an extremely common and usually chronic disease (or cluster of diseases) with a host of diffuse symptoms and an unpredictable course that left the road open for competing interpretations and made systematic testing of the efficacy of treatment methods particularly difficult. (Hakosalo 517)

Hakosalo describes how it was only late in the nineteenth century that two major factors impacted on the treatment of the disease; the first being the use of sanatoria; and the more significant but slower to impact, discovery by Robert Koch, in 1882, of *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*. British patients did not benefit from this second advance until well into the twentieth century, by which time Elizabeth le Blond had already recovered from her initial ill-health.

From the mid-nineteenth century, mountain cures, albeit in the summer, became increasingly popular (Kevan 120). Le Blond's treatment followed a similar pattern, having tried first warm coastal resorts, such as Hyères and Menton, sanatoria by the side of lake resorts in the Alps, then a range of mountain resorts, when she resolved, as she notes in the appendix to her first book, 'to take the management of my health in my own hands' (Hansen 2; *The High Alps in Winter* 186). Over the course of the next three years, Le Blond defied the advice of her doctor and her friends and return several times to the Chamonix valley to climb. In an Appendix to the main text titled 'Cold versus Heat as a Cure for Consumption', Le Blond details how she challenged the views of those friends and her doctor, writing,

> At the conclusion of the season I announced my intention of spending the winter in Switzerland. Doctor – friends – everyone exclaimed that it was madness. I, who had been on the borders of consumption, to think of anything so imprudent. (*The High Alps in Winter* 187)

This is followed by a reference to her remarkable recovery and 'the miraculous effects of the mountain air' (*The High Alps in Winter* 189).

For the following twelve years, until the death in a climbing accident in 1895 of the son of her guide Joseph Imboden, Le Blond resided and climbed in the Swiss Alps for much of her time. During this period, she gained considerable knowledge of what Hakosalo has referred to as 'the medical marketplace' in the region (Hakosalo 516). In Chapter two of *High Life and Towers of Silence*, Le Blond identifies a series of types of people encountered in the Alps. The final group she describes seem to hold particular resonance for Le Blond.

> Those who have spent several months in any of the winter health-resorts such as St. Moritz, Davos, Maloya, Wiesen, Andermatt, or Montreaux, will at once think of two officials, usually to be met with in such places, and often forming a centre contending factions and cliques. I refer to the medical and spiritual advisors. The medical advisor is often a person of weak lungs, who cannot reside in his own country [...] As he usually lives in the same hotel as his patients, his influence over them is very great, and it is by his advice that they go in spring to the lakes of Geneva and Lucerne, or to Thusis, Ragaz, Seewis, or Promontognio. I must protest against the very unwise habit, which is not infrequent, of medical men sending their patients to places, which they have not themselves visited. (*High Life and Towers of Silence* 41)

Le Blond's description of the characteristics of the 'medical men' who reside in hotels evidently draws on her previous experience. It is with some cynicism that she notes that

often, ‘he is an individual whose stock of medical knowledge is not large enough to bear distribution over anything but a very limited colony’ (*High Life and Towers of Silence* 39). In contrast, her detailed knowledge of the Alps gave Le Blond an insight into the climate of the places which were identified as suitable for invalids and convalescents, and in *High Life and Towers of Silence*, she describes how,

> I have tried Thusis, Les Avants, Glion, Montreux, Chamonix, Leian, Wiesen, Davos, and other places in the month of April, and Seewise is by far the most suitable, owing to its extremely sheltered situation. (*High Life and Towers of Silence* 42)

The list and its preceding inventory of wind and climate indicates Le Blond’s authority and intimate knowledge of the mountain communities and environment. In offering her observations and advice to prospective travellers to Alpine health resorts, Le Blond finds in her own writing a place in which she can express her frustrations about what she sees as ongoing bad practice, as well as somewhere to outline and to some extent expunge the unpleasant and frustrating experiences which she encountered in her own search for recovery.

Writing and Climbing

Despite Le Blond’s dramatic recovery from her respiratory condition, the majority of *The High Alps in Winter* focuses on the first part of its title, being an account of the first ascents which Le Blond achieved during the Winter of 1882-3, with little room, apart from a section of the preface and an appendix given to her illness and health advice. In the preface to her subsequent book, *High Life and Towers of Silence* published in 1886, after the death of her first husband and her marriage to her second, the space of the mountains takes on a further complexity. She writes,

> I have not published this little book “in order to supply a long-felt want”. On the contrary, I have no reason to suppose that it fills a gap of any sort. I have derived

> much enjoyment from the labour of writing it, and have felt some of the old pleasure of the excursions come back, as I tried to recall each point of interest. (*High Life and Towers of Silence* 195)

Here the mountainous landscape of the Alps resonates in her imagination as she writes, providing pleasure in re-visiting. We can also see Le Blond again relying on conventional female forms of the diminutive reference to writing, 'this little book', which is again undercut by her descriptions of notable mountaineering achievements throughout. Mountains both real, and imagined, then are for Le Blond, a therapeutic space, a place where she recovers from illness and enjoys reliving her adventures in the writing of them. The remainder of this chapter, focuses on the ways in which Le Blond describes the mountain spaces, and suggests that these spaces of bodily recovery, were also spaces of inspiration and empowerment through writing.

Le Blond's publications illustrate how mountaineering memoirs are bound up with the recording of achievements. In her chapter about walking up mountains in *Wanderlust; A History of Walking*, Rebecca Solnit states that, 'Being first up a mountain means entering the unknown, but for the sake of putting the place into human history, of making it known' (Solnit, 140). Solnit draws attention to the way in which mountaineering, particularly Victorian mountaineering by men, was largely about documenting achievements. As Terry Gifford has noted in his essay on early women mountaineers,

> Successful re-assimilation after a journey in transit is dependent on written or photographic evidence of a successful passage to the summit. Indeed, this is one of the reasons why the sport of mountaineering has such a strong literary heritage. (Gifford 92).

For Victorian climbers the recording of the journey or the successful climb, was essential in proving that it had indeed occurred. And where perhaps local people had scaled mountains, the fact that it was wealthy English people who documented their own successes meant that they received recognition. The late nineteenth century was a particularly rich period for accounts of mountaineering achievements in books and journals. The Alpine Club Journal had been established in 1863 and in the early 1870s, the decade preceding Le Blond's first publications, there had been significant contributions to mountaineering literature in English, such as Edward Whymper's *Scrambles Amongst the Alps*, which told the story of his fateful first ascent of the Matterhorn, in which four of his fellow climbers died, and Leslie Stephen's *The Playground of Europe.* Le Blond's recording of her mountaineering was prolific. Not only did she produce eight books summarising her adventures, she was also a pioneering mountain photographer, which enabled her to produce remarkable images of herself to supplement her literary outputs. Le Blond's literary approach to her mountain space conforms to a largely male stereotype, one which is based on making and documenting achievements in the form of first ascents or first crossings of passes. Writers such as Solnit, and Simon Bainbridge, who has written about the work of twentieth-century mountaineer Nan Shepherd, emphasise alternative modes of walking and 'being' in the mountains to the former emphasis on the 'formation and privileging of the heroic masculine identity', which involve as Bainbridge writes, Shepherd describing how she 'needed to overcome her early obsession with the Cairngorm's summits in order, "to discover the mountain itself" (Bainbridge 445, 452)'.[ii] Le Blond's achievements and her recording of them was not appreciated by all of her family. Her great aunt, Lady Bentinck wrote to Le Blond's mother, appealing, 'Stop her climbing mountains! She is scandalising all London and looks like a red Indian!' (Hansen 2004, 2).

Le Blond's depiction of the mountain space conforms to conventional representations of mountains, in that it employs the rhetoric of heroic masculine identity of conquest, identified by Bainbridge, but also offers some new perspectives, speaking particularly to the woman writer and climber. There are, I suggest, two notable features in Le Blond's representation the mountain space. The first is that her writing space is a peripatetic one, figured across various mountain locations and set in hotels in the Chamonix Valley and in Switzerland. The preface to *The High Alps in Winter* is signed off in the Hotel du Mont Blanc in Chamonix as if Le Blond is keen to show that this account was written 'on the spot'. However, in the first couple of sentences, we can see a slippage between spaces. As Le Blond notes that she 'came' (rather than 'went') to Chamonix; but then notes that she was 'there' rather than 'here'. In the first chapters of the text, she notes that she is based in the Hotel d'Angleterre in Chamonix. In the preface to the later book, *High Life and Towers of Silence* from 1886, she signs off using the married name of her second husband, as Elizabeth Main, from Saas-Fee in Switzerland. She is presumably in a hotel as there is no record of the Mains having property there. Le Blond's life in hotels in the Alps, and later after the turn of the century camping in Norway when climbing there, indicates the extent of her movement and lack of fixed domestic space. Her writing is the product of a peripatetic life-style; the mountains, in this case, the Alps being both the subject of, and place of production.

The second significant feature of Le Blond's representation of the mountain space is that it is a place of clarity and open-views, in contrast with the obscure and foggy places of the conventional Victorian leisure and recuperation, lakes and spas. *The High Alps in Winter; or, Mountaineering in Search of Health* begins with an account of Le Blond's climb of the Grandes Jorasses, part of the Mont Blanc massif and 4, 208 meters high. This was not her first climb. As she notes in the preface she had already completed the Aiguilles of Belvedere

(2,965 meters), Tacul (4248 meters), and Mont Blanc (4810 meters). The significance of this climb for Le Blond, and perhaps the reason why it is the one with which she opens her first book is that it narrates her first arduous climb; the subtitle of the chapter is 'Twenty-four hours in the snow'. This expedition took place in the September of 1882. The remaining chapters in this first memoir detail climbs she undertook in the winter of 1882-3, when, after as she writes, 'Six weeks of damp on the borders of Lake Geneva' she returned to the Chamonix valley for a winter of climbing, which as we have heard apparently shocked her friends and her doctor (*The High Alps in Winter,* 6). Once she is high in the mountains, Le Blond's writing emphasises the clarity and perspective of her view. She writes:

> Far below the graceful windings of the Mer de Glace were seen; and, on its left bank, the hotel of Montanvert showed distinctly. Across the icy sea, the dark lines produced by the unevenness of its progression, were very well marked [...] But to return to the view. To the right, the majestic form of the Aiguille Vert immediately caught the eye; it seemed almost on a level with our standpoint, and over-topped everything else at that end of the range. While to the left, the great white dome glittered in a stray sunbeam above an ocean of fleecy clouds. The misty curtain was once more drawn down, and we started in haste for the descent. (*The High Alps in Winter* 6)

Le Blond's mountain space relies on some now-familiar tropes related to the viewing of mountains such as curtains and veils, which in Victorian mountaineering narratives is connected to a sexualised rhetoric, with mountains frequently figured as female and all eventually conquered. For example, in Edward Whymper's *Scrambles in the Alps,* the author describes a frustrating attempt to climb the Aiguille de Tré-la-tête. he describes how, 'our mountain, like a beautiful coquette, sometimes unveiled herself for a moment, and looked charming above, although very mysterious below' (Whymper 228-9). The sexualised language of innocence and domination was one which drew on the rhetoric of imperial

conquest. There was, as Peter H. Hansen has discussed, a rhetorical, as well as ideological correlation between the development of mountaineering and the expansion and consolidation of nineteenth-century British colonialism (Hansen 303-4).

As shown in the extracts from Le Blond's writing, she similarly feminises the peaks and uses a language of conquest in her accounts of mountaineering; however, when considered alongside the images of dampness, fogginess, and lack of visibility when describing other situations, Le Blond's repeated emphasis on clarity and unrestricted views takes on a particular resonance. In her accounts, the lakes, places associated with the convalescence of Victorian invalids, are figured with their views obscured by fog. The contrast is particularly striking in the second chapter of *The High Alps in Winter*. Le Blond sets up the scene in Geneva, where 'nothing could exceed the gloomy appearance', noting that 'It had been enveloped in the thickest and dampest of fogs during the week which I spent there, and the cold was intense' (*The High* Alps 19). After leaving foggy Geneva, Le Blond arrives in Chamonix to clear moonlight, 'the brightness of the air was a delightful contrast to the depressing influence of the place we had left' (*The High* Alps 20). She is met that evening by her guide Edoard Cupelin and they agree to begin the next morning on a climb of the Col du Tacul, when the scene is even more vividly clear:

> The next day dawned, bright and cloudless, save for a white mist which filled the valley. It dispersed before the rising sun, and slowly, as though descending from the sky, the glittering points of the Aiguilles, and the white summit of Mont Blanc appeared right above our head. Sharper and sharper became the outline, the delicate blue background grew darker and darker, till at length all haze disappeared from the atmosphere and everything became distinct. (*The High Alps* 20-1)

This extract comes as she begins her first major achievement, that is the first recorded crossing of the Col du Tacul. The clearness of her view, repeatedly emphasised, parallels her own newly-found perspective and sense of purpose. Le Blond was just 22 years old at this point and on the verge of her long and illustrious career, climbing and writing, having left behind the world of the Victorian invalid in the damp valleys below.

In the conclusion of Le Blond's second book, *High Life and Towers of Silence*, she returns to the respiratory condition, which was the source of her first encounter with the Alps. Dividing potential travellers to the region into two groups, she writes:

> I will therefore merely wish all those who visit Switzerland for their pleasure as much enjoyment as I have derived from my travels there, and I heartily desire, for the invalids who go in search of health and strength, a benefit as great, from the pure, bracing air, as has been obtained by the author of this little work. (*High Life and Towers of Silence* 195)

Here, the clarity identified is in terms of the quality of the air for breathing as opposed to viewing in the previous examples. The trope of breathing freely is, like that of seeing clearly, symptomatic in Le Blond's writing of her empowerment from the strictures of Victorian convention and invalidism. Le Blond's third book, *My Home in the Alps*, was published in 1892, in response to many queries she had received about holidaying in the region, following the success of her former two texts. As she notes in its preface,

> The idea of publishing these trifling papers came to me through the necessity of replying to the many questions on the subjects to which I refer; for living as I do in Switzerland, I naturally am supposed to be more familiar with the peculiarities of the country and people than is the ordinary tourist. (*My Home in the Alps i*).

As indicated, by 1892, Le Blond sees herself as living in Switzerland, signing the preface from her home in Engadiner Kulm, presumably the Kulm Hotel in St. Moritz, where she was a long-term resident. By 1892, Le Blond had been widowed twice. Her first husband Colonel Fred Burnaby, having been killed in military action in Sudan and her second, John Frederic Main, having died earlier that year, in May. As Peter Hansen notes in his biography of Le Blond, 'She lived apart from her husbands for long periods of time, for several years almost entirely in Switzerland, usually in St. Moritz' (2). *My Home in the Alps* is dominated by accounts of mountain guides, their relative merits and skills, and of the challenges of certain mountain features, including moraines and glaciers, through which she intersperses recollections of her own and other's climbing adventures. Continuing the dominant theme of her first text, *The High Alps in Winter; or Mountaineering in Search of Health*, in *My Home in the* Alps, Le Blond also focuses on the merits of walking and mountain-climbing out of season. In chapter 7, 'In praise of Autumn' she describes an ascent of Finsteraarhorn (4, 274m) in the Bernese Alps, which had begun at 12.40 am and had taken until the following evening to return to the refuge. This account centres on health and draws attention to the way in which for Le Blond the mountain space and writing space blur. Using the trope of asphyxiation, Le Blond summarises the arduous day's climb, writing,

> Here is another autumn experience, in which, as a nice cheering introduction to our day's climbing, we got asphyxiated. "Were we smothered then? Where we suffocated?" asks the unthinking reader. No we were not [...] we were merely put to sleep at inconvenient periods of the day, after being put to sleep with greater soundness than usual during the preceding night. (*My Home in the Alps* 107-8)

The uncomfortable use of the trope of asphyxiation and its cognate terms to describe deep sleep recalls Le Blond's former health concerns about her possible consumption. Indeed, in

the following paragraph, in which the author acknowledges her circuitous writing style, she makes a tangential reference to her experience in sanatoria.

> But this fragmentary style and absence of all precise information points to something like present asphyxiation; so I must beg leave to say that though I date this from a health resort, I am not a "head patient", as I once heard those persons classified, who were in a particular sanatorium for something or other that was not the lungs. (*My Home in the Alps* 108)

Describing her writing as asphyxiating when it departs from expectations of clarity and order, Le Blond jokes that the reader might be unnecessarily concerned about her mental health. However, for Le Blond the articulation of her achievements and experiences on the mountain has a similarly restorative, if disruptive and disrupted, effect to that of the sound and sporadic sleep prompted by exertions in the mountain air.

Le Blond describes with apparent pleasure the physicality of climbing. Repeatedly, as with writing, she refers to the 'labour', or 'toil' or the activity (*High Life and Towers of Silence* 195; *The High Alps in Winter* 81). In her account of climbing trips to Norway, *Mountaineering in the Land of the Midnight Sun*, published in 1908, Le Blond reflects on her experiences. Once again, she parallels the two activities, writing and climbing:

> In mountaineering, as in writing, we have often to work much against the grain. How wearisome it is to get up before one has had a full night's rest, and plod over monotonous ground, with bowed heads and in the silence that falls on even the most talkative member of the party as he steadily rises above the valley. How exasperating are the slopes of loose stones, the long waits while steps are cut in the steep ice wall, the everlasting annoyance of handling the rope! Yet again and again one lightly

> submits to it all, for is not the reward worth all of the trouble? (*Mountaineering in the Land of the Midnight Sun* 123)

The emphasis in Le Blond's texts on physicality recalls recent scholarship in travel writing studies and place writing studies. Charles Forsdick, for example, calls for the recognition of the embodiment of place and the effect of experiencing movement through corporeality (Forsdick 22). He notes that 'any celebration of physicality (or definition of travel in relation to figures of youth and health) is accordingly tempered with an awareness of the potential fallibility (or at least unpredictability) of the travelling body' (Forsdick 22). Le Blond's writing, despite its emphasis on her successful climbing career, retains in its shadows, her previous time of convalescence shown through her emphasis on breathing and seeing clearly in the mountain environment.

As a wealthy young woman, Le Blond was unaccustomed to physical exertion, especially activities which may be associated with menial tasks. An indication of the physical restrictions encountered by Le Blond as a young woman comes in a description of her first climb to Grands Mulets in her autobiography, where she admits that before beginning her climbing career in 1881, she had never before laced up her own boots.

> An early Victorian touch may be introduced here. Never till that moment had I put on my own boots, and I was none too sure on which foot should go which boot. It is difficult for me to realize now that for several years longer it did not occur to me that I could do without a maid, and it was not till one of the species with incessant hysteria whenever I returned late from an expedition, another had eloped with a courtier, that I gained my independence of all assistance of the sort that they did or, more often, render. I owe a supreme debt of gratitude to the mountains for knocking from me the

> shackles of conventionality, but I had to struggle hard for my freedom. (*Day in, Day Out* 90).

Thus for Le Blond the mountains are a place where she gains freedom, from convention but particularly a freedom associated with some physical activity.

Any discussion of Le Blond's physical exertion must however be read in terms of her class status. In both of the preceding extracts, there is reference to the physical assistance given by servants, the maid who helped her dress and subsequently the guides who cut the steps in the ice while she waited to climb the mountain. Climbing mountains and gaining the exhilaration claimed by Le Blond in her writing, required a significant financial status, not least to pay guides to accompany and help the climber. As Simon Thompson argues in his book about the development of British climbing, the majority of early mountaineers were young men from the professional classes, with access to a long summer holiday (Thompson 52). Mountain guides, and porters, not only had local knowledge of the mountains, they were essential in carrying equipment and facilitating the climb, by cutting steps and pulling their employers up through difficult traverses by ropes. Le Blond's account of her physical exertion goes some way beyond the boundaries of convention for Victorian notions of femininity, but it also indicates her reliance on paid helpers.

By way of conclusion, the final focus for this chapter returns to Le Blond's first book, *The High Alps in Winter* and an account, in chapter three, of her ascent of the Aiguille du Midi (3,842 meters), which was to be the first winter ascent of the mountain. This section draws together Le Blond's figuring of the clarity of the air and view at high altitude, with the exhilaration she feels as one of a group of mountaineers (albeit paid guides and companions) engaged in the physical work of scaling the peak after the restrictions of her former life. As

she begins her climb of she notes the clarity of the scene once again, that 'The sky was blue and clear, the distant mountain wonderfully distinct. A fog hung, as usual, over Geneva' (*The High Alps in Winter* 46). She continues,

> In some places the snow did not lie thick enough to admit of a good step being cut in it. It had in that case to be removed until a ledge was found beneath, and the rocks were then wet and slippery. They were smooth and polished in the Cheminée and without foothold or handhold for a person of my small stature. I mounted them on my knees, my hands spread out against the rougher portions of the rock. A considerable amount of tugging, from above was necessary, and Cupelin, from his lofty perch, looked like a fisherman landing an unwieldy salmon. At last Auguste, who led, exclaimed "Voilà!" and in a few minutes we all stood on the top. Chamonix lay at our feet, and a puff of smoke followed some seconds later by a "boom", announced that the good people below had seen our arrival and were firing the cannon in our honour, it was just two o' clock [...] For twenty minutes I enjoyed the magnificent view. (*The High Alps in Winter* 52-3).

The mountain space here is an extremely physical one, not least for the guides Edouard Cupelin and Auguste Comte, who are described here cutting steps in the ice for their employer. Le Blond frequently represents herself in ungainly postures and here she is passive as her guide hauls her up the narrow chimney of rock. Significantly the space of the ascent and success is a social one. Le Blond seems to enjoy the camaraderie with her guides and the recognition of the cannon fire is seen as a joint one which she relishes. However, in the Alpine Club records, it is Le Blond who gets the credit for this (and the other) first Winter ascents, rather than her guides of course. Once she turns to the view, again there is the clarity of vision, she returns to an individualised perspective. Her moments enjoying the view are solitary and more personal it seems.

Elizabeth Le Blond's early publications indicate the extent to which outdoor space was both an inspiration and prompt for writing. Highlighting the peripatetic nature of her writing space, she is keen to emphasise the physical exertion and 'toil' which is required by both writing and climbing, pushing to some extent at the boundaries of conventional feminine behaviour of the period. Le Blond's access to the mountains was one which served her with an opportunity of escaping a domestic and possibly invalid role in order to make significant achievements in mountaineering. These glimpses of possibilities and freedom are represented in her writing through the representation of the clear air and sparkling views of the winter peaks she climbs. For Le Blond, the mountains and her ability to move amongst them removed her from the stasis of the Victorian home or spa resort and allowed her undeniable autonomy in arranging her own programme and setting her own ambitions. However, access to this world was not open to many women, it was a space only accessible to those who had the leisure and money to afford them entry to it.

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[i] In this chapter, I will use the name Elizabeth Le Blond for the author throughout, which was her final married name. She married three times and was known variously, as Mrs. Fred Burnaby, Mrs. John Frederic Main, and Mrs. Aubrey Le Blond.

[ii] See also Rebecca Solnit's description of Gwen Moffat, p. 140.