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**'A fisherman landing an unwieldy salmon'; The Alpine Guide and Female Mountaineer**

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Writing in her autobiography *Day in, Day out* of her first attempt at mountaineering in 1881, Elizabeth Le Blond admits:

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. (1928, 90) <sup>1</sup>

In the account that follows Le Blond describes how her dependence on servants is part of ‘the shackles of conventionality’ and notes that, “I owe a supreme debt of gratitude to the mountains for knocking [them] from me” (1928, 90). Mountaineering, it seems, made Le Blond more independent and less inclined to rely on paid assistance. This article focuses on the writing of Elizabeth Le Blond, the most notable female writer about mountaineering in the nineteenth century. Although several other women, including Meeta Breevort and Lucy Walker had made important women first ascents climbs and had significant mountaineering experience by the time Le Blond began climbing in 1881. However Le Blond extended women’s contribution to climbing and was the most prolific mountaineering author of the period.<sup>2</sup> In her writing, Le Blond identified mountaineering as a sport which pushes at the individual’s core assumptions about themselves. The physicality of the activity and encounter with sublime scenery whilst mountaineering have both been identified as contributory factors in the dissolving of key attributes of the climber’s sense of identity. As Simon Bainbridge notes, “the place of elevation becomes a site of revelation, a location for the self’s triumph or obliteration” (2015, 444).

Scholarly consideration of the identity of the climber in mountaineering texts has largely focused on that of the male climber in the early and mid-nineteenth century and considered his identity in terms of creativity or status (Bainbridge 2012, 2015; Gilchrist 2013; Thompson 2010).<sup>3</sup> A number of recent studies have focused on male mountaineers and their embodied experience of climbing mountains as a way of asserting particularly

masculine qualities. For example, Simon Bainbridge writing about John Stoddart climbing Ben Lomond, notes that in his 1801 account of the haptic sublime, that is the transcendence brought about by the physicality of climbing, ‘might be seen an example of the power and gender politics inherent within Romanticism and mountaineering’ (Bainbridge, 2012, 8).<sup>4</sup>

Focusing on the identity of the female mountaineer on her expeditions, this article contributes to a small emerging corpus of texts which discuss the representation of the experience of climbing by Victorian women (Williams 1973; McCrone 1988; Brown and Blum 2002; Osborne, 2004; Colley 2010; Roche 2013). Clare Roche has recently asserted that her work is one of few texts which challenge “the cavalier and superficial way in which some historians have dealt with women mountaineers” (2013, 4). Whereas Ann C. Colley’s chapter ‘Ladies on High’, while outlining the bigotry and opposition faced by some women climbers, is illuminating in its account of the extent to which women did participate in mountaineering expeditions in the latter part of the nineteenth century, suggesting that this is often substantially underplayed. By the turn of the century women climbers had scaled Europe’s most dangerous peaks and in 1907 had established a mountaineering club for themselves, the Lyceum Club or the Ladies’ Alpine Club (Thompson 2010, 74; Roche 2015).

Elizabeth le Blond, whose texts are the focus of this article, was founder and first president of the Ladies Alpine Club. Le Blond is one of British climbing’s most prolific female authors, publishing seven texts about her Alpine and Norwegian expeditions between 1883 and 1908. Born in 1860, Le Blonde was the daughter of Sir St Vincent Bentinck Hawkins-Whitshed, an Irish baronet. She married traveller and explorer Colonel Frederick Gustavus Burnaby in June 1879; her only son was born in 1880 and she began her climbing career the following year after going to Chamonix for her health (Hansen, 2004). Her work has attracted limited scholarly attention by historians of sport focused largely on her climbing, rather than literary, achievements.<sup>5</sup> Le Blond’s texts are significant not only in their

scope and volume detailing the female contribution to Victorian mountaineering, but particularly, as I investigate here, for her extensive discussions of the role of the mountain guide. Whilst there were, as Colley notes, an extensive number of women mountaineers during the latter half of the nineteenth century, and many who, like Le Blond, had enduring relationships with their guides, Le Blond's textual testimony about her guides is by far the most substantial.<sup>6</sup> Concentrating on Le Blond's first mountaineering text, *The High Alps in Winter* from 1883, and *True Tales of Mountain Adventure* from 1903, I re-appraise the relationship between the nineteenth-century climber and guide and consider how the physicality of climbing pushed at the social and gendered identity of the upper-class woman.

### **1. The History of Alpine Mountain-Guiding**

Accounts of inhabitants of mountain areas called on to assist in the expeditions of visitors, guiding them over difficult passes, have been recorded from the late eighteenth century as Ronald Clark notes, but clearly this role was in evidence centuries before (Clarke 1949, 13; de Bellefon 2003). In both the Alps and the Pyrenees, guiding was formalised by the local authorities in the first part of the nineteenth century, with an examination for guides established in Luchon in South-West France, by 1850 (Ughetto 2006, 136). Guides were usually local; Chamonix for example was famous for restricting its appellation of guides to those from its region until the 1960s (Ughetto 2006, 136). Although the local male population used guiding often to supplement their income from manual or farming work, there is evidence of a small number of guides from other social backgrounds (Braham 2004, 236).<sup>7</sup> As American mountaineer and writer, William Coolidge noted in his 1909 text *The Alps in Nature and History*:

Many guides, too, follow regular trades; some are carpenters, or blacksmiths, or butchers, or keep small shops, or hire themselves out – in the case of the poorer men,

as day-labourers, hay-makers, etc. Others occupy official posts in their native valleys; so at Grindelwald both the President of the Commune and its Treasurer are actually glacier guides. (1909, 263-4)

Joseph Imboden for example, guide for Elizabeth Le Blond, also became an influential resident of his village of St. Nicholas; his guiding career facilitating his social position (Clarke 1949, 74).<sup>8</sup> Guides were largely from modest social backgrounds however, and rarely equalled their clients in social status.

Therefore it should not be overlooked that the relationship between guide and climber was based on money. Guides climbed to earn their living, which could be erratic due to weather conditions and tourist numbers, whereas British visitors climbed for leisure, status and collecting records. Guiding was largely a seasonal activity, with guides having to rely on other work to support themselves and their families during the remainder of the year. Le Blond was one of few climbers who went on mountain expeditions in the winter. The unpredictable earnings for guides was one inducement for them to take advantage of as many potentially dangerous climbing expeditions as possible. Following the Matterhorn tragedy in 1865, when three British climbers and guide Michel Croz fell to their deaths, and into the period in which Le Blond was climbing, there was considerable debate about the responsibility of the client to the hired guides (see for example Dickens 1865, 135; 'New Books' in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 1871, 468; Preston-Thomas 1895, 92-103. 'Review of *The Pioneers of the Alps*' in *The Athenaeum* 1888, 139). On both sides of this debate guides are often depicted as lacking agency; they are described as being tempted 'by the inducement of an enormous bribe' and 'liberal offers' to go on dangerous expeditions and there is little reference to mountaineering objectives shared between client and guide ('Review of *The Pioneers of the Alps*' in *The Athenaeum* 1888, 139; Michelet 1872, 27).<sup>9</sup>

In scholarship on mountaineering, class has been identified as one of the principal characteristics of identity which was called into question during a climb. Michael Reidy, focusing on the ways in which climbers of differing social classes addressed each other, proposes that, 'The mountain ascent became one of the few places where men could transcend class divisions, at least rhetorically, erasing the social stratification between worker and gentleman' (2015, 173). Social hierarchies between guides and their clients were likewise challenged by the experience of the climbing (Reidy 2015, 173; Hansen 1999, 211). In his analysis of the relationship between mountain guides and clients between 1850 and 1950, Hansen sets out that,

the relationship British climbers enjoyed with their Alpine guides or Himalayan Sherpas sometimes resembled what Victor Turner has called 'communitas', a sense of egalitarian harmony and bonding that takes place between individuals who escape the social hierarchies of everyday life. (1999, 211)

Using anthropologist Victor Turner's notion of "communitas" evolved through his study of pilgrimage, Hansen describes a temporary situation with an absence of social structures, including economic and social boundaries, after which the participants return to ordinary life. Despite a fundamental difference in their motivations for climbing, such moments of camaraderie and friendship with her guide Joseph Imboden are evident throughout Le Blond's mountaineering accounts and at points indicate that a relatively egalitarian relationship pertained beyond the boundaries of the expedition itself. Le Blond's gender adds nuance and complexity to the relationship however; her texts show her desire to indicate the care the guides take over her and her humour diffuses potentially controversial intimacies.

## **2. The Representation of Guides in Elizabeth le Blond's Mountaineering Texts**

From the outset the guides are central, thematically and structurally, to Le Blond's narrative of her entry into mountaineering. In the preface of *The High Alps in Winter; or Mountaineering in Search of Health*, Le Blond outlines how she began climbing and details her first attempts. She notes, "In the summer of 1881 I came to Chamonix for the first time" in an effort to improve her health, and "after a fortnight spent in the fresh mountain air, I was, one day, induced by some friends to accompany them to Pierrepontue" (1883, v). Following the birth of her son in 1880, Le Blond had suffered from consumption and she was sent to recover in Switzerland (Hansen 2004). The guides persuaded Le Blond and her friend, Lady Evelyn McDonnell, almost deceive it seems, to attempt a more difficult excursion than they had intended (Thompson 2010, 74). They set off for the Pierre-Pointue (6723m) in the foothills of Mont Blanc, when another climber asks the young women if they are climbing to the Grands Mulets, further up the route towards the summit of Mont Blanc.<sup>10</sup> She describes how,

As for the guides, their plans had been laid long before; and casually observing that they "happened" to have a rope in the knapsack of one of them, they declared that we could easily be "up there" in a couple of hours, and urged us to make the attempt.  
(1928, 89)

Le Blond identifies this expedition as key to her subsequent fascination with climbing. In summing up her early attempts in the preface to *The High Alps in Winter* she notes how, "It has been my invariable practice to always employ the very best guides, and many obstacles were, no doubt, overcome by the skill of the men who accompanied me" (1883, viii).

Le Blond was typical of many mountaineers in her lavish praise of her guides in her writing. In response to the assertion by a Swiss climber, who had noted that the guides "were not accorded a fraction of the glory" of that received by their clients, Trevor Braham contends, "That is not wholly true. The leading amateurs of the era were unsparing in praise

for their guides” (2004, 236). Citing Nicholas Jardine and Emma Spary, Reidy likewise notes that, “The guides were not dismissed ambivalently, as we might expect. They were not invisible, making up the ‘silent majority who never made it into the world of documents’” (2015, 171; [cites Jardine and Spary in Jardine, Secord and Spary 1996, 9]). Many significant mountaineers of the ‘Golden Age’ of mountaineering praised their guides extensively in their writing, such as Leslie Stephen, who encouraged readers to “appreciate the capacities” of this “singularly intelligent and worthy class of men” (1907 [1861], 76). Despite their integral role in the success of British mountaineers, however, later in the period guides were negatively associated with the considerable expansion in travel to the Alps. In her brief account of “Class Pollution in the Alps”, Ann C. Colley notes the discourse of contagion which is used in texts of the period to describe the way in which “guides and hangers-on” are seen as infecting the Alps with large numbers of lower-class tourists (2010b, 37). Towards the end of the nineteenth-century there was an increasing movement towards guideless climbing. Numerous articles in the *Alpine Journal* after the mid-1860s discussed the practice and despite some controversy, several popular texts outlined guideless excursions to the highest Alpine peaks, including those by Tyndall and Hudson and Kennedy, who scaled Mont Blanc.<sup>11</sup> Following a paper at the Alpine Club, F. Craufurd Grove published “The Comparative Skill of Travellers and Guides” in the club’s journal. He proposed that, “Englishmen can never hope, save in cases so exceptional as not to come within the scope of any general argument, to equal even second-rate guides” (1870, 92). In the summary of the ensuing discussion, the conclusion reached was:

the neglect to take guides on difficult expedition, and especially the neglect to take them when the party is not exclusively composed of practised mountaineers, is totally unjustifiable, and calculated to produce the most lamentable results. (Craufurd Grove 1870, 96)



The Alpine Club persisted in its high praise of the work of guides and through the remainder of the century continued to advocate their employment.

Although, as Colley notes, Le Blond did make guideless attempts, overwhelmingly her climbing excursions were accompanied, most often by Edouard Cupelin and in later years by Joseph Imboden (2010, 108).<sup>12</sup> Le Blond describes how her guides assist her physically on the climb, often lifting her on ropes, and provide a domestic role, organising meals and accommodation, even going to the village to get a chicken for Le Blond to eat before a climb up to Col St. Théodule (1886, 146). The role of the guides forms the subject of considerable sections *My Home in the Alps*, published in 1892, of which the first five chapters addressed the subject of mountain guides and in *True Tales of Mountain Adventure*. In chapter four of *True Tales*, interestingly identifying the ‘traveller’ as male, she notes how,

Occasionally a guide’s manipulation of the rope includes something more arduous than merely being always ready to stop a slip. If his traveller is tired and the snow slopes are long and wearisome, it may happen that a guide will put the rope over his shoulder and pull his gentleman. (1903, 39).

Not only did guides pull, encourage or carry their clients, they also were required to cut steps in the snow and ice, especially during winter, when Le Blond made many of the excursions which are the subject of her first text. Crampons were not widely used until the twentieth century (Roche, 2015, 251). The creation of a path on the mountain was an extremely strenuous task for guides, as Hansen notes, “local guides did the lion’s share of the work by finding paths, carrying loads or cutting steps into the ice” (1999, 210).<sup>13</sup>

A guide’s pay depended on his reputation and experience as Le Blond details in *True Tales of Mountain Adventure* from 1903:

The pay of a first-class guide is seldom by tariff, for the class of climber who alone would have the opportunity of securing the services of one of the extremely limited

number of guides of the order engages him for some weeks at a time. Indeed, such men are usually bespoken a year in advance. The pay offered and expected is 25 Fr. a day, including all expeditions, or else 10 Fr. a day for rest day, 50 Fr. for a peak, 25 Fr. for a pass, in both cases a guide to keep himself, while travelling expenses and food on expeditions are to be paid for by the client. If a season is fine and the party energetic, the former rate of payment may be the cheaper. The second guide generally receives two-thirds as much as the first guide. (1903, 28)

Le Blond's notes indicate not only varying amounts between different guides and occasionally different excursions, but also the fact that guides with the best reputation were hired for long periods. Details of successful climbs and comments by previous climbers were kept in *Führerbüchen*.<sup>14</sup> These testimonials were extremely significant in securing work and establishing a guide's status. Le Blond advises the novice climber in *True Tales of Mountain Adventure*, "before making any definite arrangements, see the men themselves and carefully examine their books of certificates" (1903, 29). To take advantage of the long-term appointment of guides, and get their money's worth, clients felt the need to make as many expeditions into the mountains as possible, a fact lamented in an article, "Mountaineering with Ladies" in *Tinsleys' Magazine* in 1874. Including a conversation between himself and a friend, H. Schütz Wilson notes, "I agree with you in disliking the present system, and I admit that I at times feel guides a tie – I don't mean the men, but the system" (1874, 554). Le Blond did not seem to regard her agreement with Cupelin a tie. Unlike Wilson, who notes that, "Sometimes I should like a day's rest; sometimes I am in the contemplative, and not active mood", in *The High Alps in Winter* Le Blond describes her feelings of "restlessness" on what should have been a day without an excursion. She describes how:

A day of unusual magnificence produced in me the restless wish to "do something" on the morrow, and drew me in the direction of Pélérins, where my guide lives. His

wife was in, and begged me to wait, as she expected her husband at every moment.

He turned up presently, and I unfolded to him my plans. My desires soared to the summit of the Aiguille Vert, but much fresh snow had fallen, and prudence counselled a more modest ascent.

“We could do the Aiguille du Midi,” suggested Cupelin.

“But it would be such a bore to spend the night on the Col du Géant,” I remarked.

“We will do it all from Montanvert,” he answered.

“You think that we could?”

“Ma foi, *oui* ; et nous le ferons. [But yes, we could; and we will]”. (1883, 48)

Going to visit Cupelin at home, Le Blond is prompted by a desire to climb and enjoy the weather, rather than an obligation to occupy her guide as much as possible. Her detailing of their conversation indicates the closeness of their relationship, and furthermore Le Blond’s intention to record and demonstrate it. In the exchange Cupelin is shown to understand Le Blond’s ambitions and in return she values his opinions and takes direction. The conventional hierarchical relationship of client and guide seems to be re-worked here into something more collegiate and discursive.

In Chapter Four of *True Tales of Mountain Adventure*, “The Guides of the Alps: What they are and What they do”, she positions her own knowledge of the guide’s role as superior to that of the “non-climber” and describes the frequent misconceptions,

I have usually noticed that the abilities and duties of a guide are little understood by the non-climber, who often imagines that a guide’s sole business is to know the way and to carry the various useless articles which the beginner in mountaineering insists on taking with him. (1903, 22)

Challenging this assumption and illustrating the leading role that the guide must assume, Le Blond continues, describing how,

The first-class guide must be the general of the little army setting out to invade the higher regions. He need not *know* the way – in fact, it sometimes happens that he has never before visited the district – but he must be able to *find* a way, and a safe one, to the summit of the peak for which his party is bound. (1903, 23)<sup>15</sup>

Le Blond's analogy of the guide as the army general indicates an apparent reversal in hierarchy and the dependence of the party on his decisions for their safety. Thus rather than the "communitas" of a shared experience described by Hansen, the guide takes charge of the party and they, in turn, must obey his orders. Le Blond's relationship with her guides was appreciated in one of the generally positive reviews of *The High Alps in Winter*. In the review in *The Academy*, Douglas Freshfield, himself a mountaineer, noted the importance of recognising the authority of the guide:

She [Le Blond] was fortunate in securing the services of a first-rate Chamonix guide and his brother, and under their leadership seems to have picked up with singular aptitude a knowledge of all of the mysteries of mountain-craft. One of the first of these - though not perhaps the most generally recognised of late – is a due appreciation of the skill, bravery and honesty of good guides, and a readiness to defer to their judgement. (Freshfield, 1883, 395)

A rare negative review of Le Blond's text in the *Alpine Journal* likewise highlights her positive relationship with the guides. The reviewer notes that her winter climbs 'form a remarkable series, and that they were carried through without serious mishap says much for the judgment and skill of Mrs. Burnaby's guides' ('Reviews and Notices', *Alpine Journal* 1883, 307).

Throughout *The High Alps in Winter* Le Blond describes situations when Cupelin leads the party and pushes her to continue when she believes she cannot. For example,

describing a moment when they reach a crevasse formed alongside a glacier, she recalls how Cupelin insists she can make the jump herself:

The bergschrund was reached in the middle, this time, and a little plateau on the other side was waiting to receive us from the slope above...

“Cupelin, I can’t jump that!” I exclaimed,

“Over with you, madame!” (1883, 37)

Le Blond makes the leap over the crevasse, willing to trust Cupelin’s judgment over her own. Later, whilst on their climb of St. Pierre, she describes once more how she defers to Cupelin’s programme, eating when he designates and accepting her regular position in the climbing group, second when descending and third when ascending (1883, 84).

Le Blond’s physical and psychological reliance on Cupelin in her climbing is indicated early on in *The High Alps in Winter*. The text opens with her disappointment at not having enough time to telegraph in advance for Cupelin and having to instead engage, “Proment, of Courmayer, and two porters” (1883, 2). The first climb did not start well and Le Blond notes how,

The progress was rather slow. I was not accustomed to my guides, and they were not accustomed to me. They often did not know where I required a helping hand and where I could move alone...[.] We wandered about for some time longer (during which I mentally registered a vow that nothing should ever induce me to make another ascent without Cupelin). (1883, 6, 8)

The rapport between guide and traveller had been established through Cupelin’s experience of Le Blond’s physical and mental capabilities, and with Proment this rapport was lacking. The close relationship between guide and climber enables the guide to assert what he thinks the traveller can manage, and to challenge the traveller when he believes they are lacking confidence. Le Blond’s account of her climb with Proment, detailed in the first chapter of the

text, shows her lack of trust in him and her reluctance to accept his advice. In one anecdote from this section Le Blond details how she insists on being lowered down a couloir despite Proment's insistence on its accessibility and safety. Le Blond describes how,

Two seconds after he passed it a mass of gigantic stones fell from the ice above.

“Ah! Quelle chance” he exclaimed. “Mais, vous savez, il n’y a pas de danger!” was my reply. (13)

Le Blond sarcastically repeats the guide's assurance of the safety of the manoeuvre after the fall of stones and draws attention to the veracity of her own assessment of the danger. She not only over-rules the guide's judgement but insists she has been correct to do so. The contrast in the representation between Le Blond's interactions with Proment and Cupelin highlight the significance of the relationship between guide and traveller, one which is established through the negotiation and agreement of a complex and often contradictory set of hierarchies. In terms of physical exertion and endurance, as well as knowledge and experience of the terrain, the guide was superior; in contrast, as shown in the significance of the *Führerbüchen* the traveller held economic power, status, and the possibility to supplement or ruin the reputation of the guide.

The point, both timing and altitude, at which the guide took the lead of the party is a significant complexity in the depiction of the relationship between guide and client. In her analogy of the guide as “the general of the little army”, Le Blond indicates that it is as they are “setting out to invade the higher regions” that he assumes command of the party (1883, 23). Reidy apparently concurs: “the guide led the party. It was his decision that constrained the choices of the amateur, defining where they could go and when they had to turn back” (2015, 173). However, where Le Blond negotiates and agrees an excursion with her guide as “general” from the moment of departure, Reidy asserts that there was an association between altitude and command (2015, 173). He writes, that that for the climbing party, “the decision-

making and power structure was thus mapped onto a vertical scale”; that up to a certain point the amateur had control and subsequently this is taken by the guide (2015, 173). Simon Thompson also asserts that climbing involves a temporary suspension of social hierarchy and class identity, where conventions return once the party have returned.

On the mountain the relationship between client and guide was often friendly and informal but when they returned to the valley the social divide between gentleman and peasant reasserted itself. While the English gentleman headed to the *table d’hôte* to celebrate his triumph, his guide went to the servants’ quarters in the cellar or the attic. (2003, 36)

Thompson, like Reidy, confirms Le Blond’s apparent representation of the guide’s leadership in the “higher regions” but not once the party have returned to the village.

Le Blond’s texts challenge clear boundaries of control however. In her accounts of the conversations between herself and her guide which precede climbs, it is clear that despite making her own suggestions, she defers to the guide’s plan and his opinions. For example, in planning her first climb, “the one remaining untrodden Col in the chain of Mont Blanc”, she reflects on her reasons for choosing this, noting:

Therefore, if *I* made the first passage I should perform three praiseworthy actions.

First, I should deprive “somebody else” of it; secondly, I should unite the glaciers of Léchaud and Géant by a passage involving a detour of about five hours from the ordinary route; and thirdly, the Aiguille du Tacul would be ascended in quite a new way. (1883, 21)

Le Blond’s motivations for the climb are articulated in terms of her own status and making history and developing new routes. Cupelin’s part in the process is revealed on the next page: “Cupelin believed that ‘il peut sa faire [it could be done]’” (1883, 22). His definitive statement again seals the decision to attempt the climb. The selection of routes and

organizing role of the guide recalls work by Noel Salazar in tourism studies on the role of contemporary guides, noting how they “organize and limit the tourist gaze and thereby the tourist experience” (2010, 116). Salazar draws on the work of Yu, Weiler and Ham (2004, 4-5) and asserts the importance of the “mediating” role of the guide, one element of which is “determining which part of the local environment, heritage and culture is exposed and which is hidden” (2010, 116). The agency of Alpine climbers in the late nineteenth century was frequently motivated by a desire, like Le Blond, to claim a first-ascent, or discover a new route. However, in addition to the negotiation between guide and client, Le Blond’s text reveals the extent to which these itineraries were organized and manipulated by the advice and the opinions of Alpine guides.

### **3. Camaraderie and physical proximity**

The “communitas” existing between Victorian Alpine guides and their clients when climbing is evident in Le Blond’s descriptions of their camaraderie and shared achievements.

Highlighting the way in which the guides are enthusiastic about the climbs and adopt them as a joint project rather than merely the whim of the foreign traveller, Le Blond signals what appear to be moments in which the various hierarchies implicit in their relationship are set aside. There is a clear sense of the sense of shared goals in *The High Alps in Winter* as well as in the later texts where she describes climbing with Joseph Imboden in Norway. In her first text, Le Blond describes the feelings of the party completing the climb over the Col to the Géant glacier: “Our excitement was intense’ (1883, 23). She notes the enthusiasm of the guides: ‘Tu es mort, tu es mort, Col du Tacul [You are dead]!’ cried the guides, and we went to our work with a will; the Col was ours!’” (1883, 24). However, Le Blond culminates her text with an account of scaling Monte Rosa, at 4,634 metres one of Switzerland’s highest and



most arduous climbs. Although the various peaks of the Monte Rosa massif were climbed from 1801 onwards, the summit, or Dufourspitze, was not reached until 1855, with the first female ascent in 1857 by Emma Forman (Roche 2015, 326).<sup>16</sup> Heightening the tension, Le Blond highlights the competition between her own group and a group of Italian climbers, led by Vittorio Sella.<sup>17</sup> In the account she emphasises the commitment of her guides to beat the Italian group to the top. The goal of scaling Monte Rosa is one apparently shared with her guides, as Le Blond notes Cupelin's words:

“Madame,” he answered, “I have just heard something which has provoked me very much.” “I fear that we have lost Monte Rosa” (1883, 125).

Apparently equally frustrated by the news, Le Blond indicates this as their joint project, and instructs her guide: “‘Cupelin, turn over every plan you can think of to outwit them,’ I said. ‘I will do the same, and to-morrow we will compare notes’” (1883, 126). They set off with the Italian party at one o’ clock in the morning but the Italians begin to feel uneasy and let Cupelin and Le Blond’s other guides take the lead. Le Blond is quick to make a comparison between the actions of her own guides and those of the Italian party. She writes that, “So far my men had not uttered a word as to the cold. The other guides had already grumbled once or twice to them” (1883, 162). The centrality of the guides to the success of the expedition is revealed as Le Blond notes how, “Signor Sella, ever the most courageous, said that he did not feel the cold and would like to continue; but his men were utterly incapable of following, and refused point-blank” (1883, 163). The abandoned climb on Monte Rosa is the culmination of Le Blond’s text and the guides are acknowledged for their contribution to it. As such their roles are given a prominent textual position. She concludes, “I cannot end without expressing my admiration of the consummate skill, strength, good temper, and cheerfulness displayed by my guides on every occasion” (1883, 180).

Shared jokes as well as goals signal the camaraderie between Le Blond and her guides in *The High Alps in Winter*. For example, an anecdote which describes Cupelin's fall over a cornice and landing near a chalet, results in a joke which was repeated between them and the rest of the party; "and to this day," she notes, "Edouard Cupelin has not heard the end of his jump over the cornice of Lognon" (1883, 63). Often, as here, these shared jokes which thread through the travelogue rely on slips and physical misjudgements, which bring the climbers in close physical proximity with each other. Referring back to this episode Le Blond describes her slip down a couloir rather than the "standing glissade" she intended (1883, 119). She tells how Auguste, another of the guides, "dared not put in his ice-axe, I might have cut myself with it, and, as I shot up against him, he too fell, and down we both slid at the rate of sixty miles an hour" (1883, 119-120). This becomes known as "'La glissade de madame'[and] became quite as much a proverb as Cupelin's cornice or Auguste's crevasse" (1883, 120). The shared joke acts to bond the group and indicates their intimacy, but also defuses what might otherwise be awkward or at least socially unacceptable physical contact between the upper-class Victorian married woman and her lower-class Alpine guides.

Thus far this article has identified numerous features common to both Le Blond's accounts of mountaineering with guides and the experience claimed by male climbers. In contrast, for the lone female mountaineer intimacy and physical contact with a male guide particularly considering nineteenth-century conventions of female propriety, would potentially cause consternation amongst readers and reviewers. Surprisingly, Le Blond's text was applauded by Victorian audiences. In Douglas Freshfield's review of *The High Alps in Winter* in *The Academy* discussed earlier, the relationship between Le Blond and her guides was lauded as exemplary (1883, 395). In response to the dilemma of the reputation of the lone woman mountaineer without male climbing partners, Clare Roche asserts that little concern was paid to women mountaineers following the Matterhorn tragedy of 1865, when

four members of Edward Whymper's party including Michel Croz fell to their deaths.

Climbing received a considerable amount of negative publicity following the tragedy and to draw attention to that fact that "women were spending nights alone on the mountain with relative strangers ... may have brought [further] unwelcome attention to mountaineering as a whole" (2015, 253).

In her authorship, Le Blond to some extent courted controversy by foregrounding her gender; her texts are always assigned to her married name, either Mrs. Fred Burnaby, Mrs. Main or Mrs. Aubrey Le Blond. Furthermore, she makes clear the absence of her husband on the climb in each of the texts; although Aubrey Le Blond does make an appearance in her texts about Norway, when they go camping and fishing together. Remarkably Le Blond's texts received generally positive reviews, summed up by *The Graphic*, which judged that, "Mrs. Fred Burnaby has performed feats of which any lady might be proud" (1883, 3: See also: *The Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser* 1883, 3; *The Morning Post* 1883, 3). Le Blond's principal method of diffusing impropriety or sexual tension was by emphasising the humour of the situations. She frequently draws on the unattractiveness or ungainliness of her own appearance as the main source of humour. For example, when climbing rocks on the Aiguille du Midi, she describes how,

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. (1883, 52)

Her passivity and lack of grace here contrasts with Cupelin's height and his attempts to control her movements. Her position, both prone and beneath her guide, indicates his relative power in this situation. The anecdote is humorous and its potential controversy is defused because readers have been assured of Le Blond's status and aware that the situation is temporary.

Aside from comedy, Le Blond also emphasised the tenderness and care shown by her guides in anecdotes of their joint excursions. During their climb on Monte Rosa detailed in *The High Alps in Winter*, she describes how the guides are startled to see her frostbitten nose and begin to rub it:

Presently the amount of rubbing which it received seemed to satisfy them, for Cupelin exclaimed, -

“Ah, it’s beautiful now!”

“Beautiful! What do you mean?” I inquired.

“Yes,” answered my guide; “it’s now getting quite black!”

It seemed that my nose had got frost-bitten; that its turning white was the first sign of catastrophe, and getting black afterwards showed that it was cured. (1883, 163)

Cupelin’s unexpected answer undercuts and disarms the intimacy of this scene and his previous comment about her beautiful nose. Despite Le Blond’s depiction of the humour in this situation, it seems that she appreciates the compassion and loyalty of the guides. In her 1892 book, *My Home in the Alps*, she describes how whilst asleep in a Cabin near to the Orny Glacier in the Swiss region of Valais on Mont Blanc, the guides “took off their coats and covered me with them, so that I might not feel cold, while they sat up all night brewing hot tea, and vying with each other in stories of chamois hunts” (1892, 37). Le Blond includes many more references to the attention provided by the guides for their clients in her later writing. Having established such long-standing relationships with Cupelin and later Joseph Imboden, the demonstration of their commitment is highlighted to a greater extent.

Le Blond’s strongest representation of the loyalty and courage of the guides comes as she details examples of accidents on the mountains. In the final appendix of *The High Alps in Winter*, showing the risks to both climbers and guides of mountaineering in winter, she cites the case of Bennen, a local guide, who died alongside an English climber in an avalanche on

the Haut-de-Cry, a mountain in the Bernese Alps (1883, 204). In Le Blond's 1906 text *True Tales of Mountain Adventure*, she draws together a number of anecdotes indicating the character and bravery of the Alpine guides. Frequently, as illustrated in Le Blond's text, the danger of mountaineering was to have a greater physical impact on the guides than the travellers; for example, she cites an expedition to the Croda Grande in the Italian Dolomites where according to the guide's account of the climb he "lost three fingers of his right hand and one of the left from frost-bite; the traveller appears to have come off scot-free" (1903, 49). In *True Tales of Mountain Adventure*, she gives the background and career history of Joseph Imboden, with whom Le Blond climbed for fifteen years at the end of the nineteenth century and in the first years of the twentieth century. Imboden and his family came from the Swiss village of St. Nicholas. She writes of the extent to which values of loyalty and courage are enmeshed in the character of the guides from this village:

It is an unbroken tradition that no St. Nicholas guide ever comes home without his client; all return safely or all are killed. Alas! The list of killed is a long one from that little Alpine village. In the churchyard, from the more recent grave, covered by the beautiful white marble stone placed there by Roman's English friends, to those recalling accidents a score or more of years ago, there lies the dust of many brave men. (1903, 38)

Le Blond's reference is to Roman, Joseph Imboden's eldest son, also a mountain guide, who died in an avalanche on 10<sup>th</sup> September 1896, after a fall on the east ridge of the Lyskamm, along with his client Dr. Max Günther and another guide, Peter Ruppen. In *True Tales of Mountain Adventure*, Le Blond's extended and poignant account of the day of Roman Imboden's death includes much of her empathetic account of Joseph's reaction. The anticipation of news of the party is given as she notes how outside the Hotel Zermatt from

which the climbers had set off, “The crowd grew larger and larger in the dark without. All waited in cruel suspense ... I could not bear to think of Imboden” (1883, 36). She continues:

I need not dwell on Imboden’s grief. He will never be the same man again, though three more sons are left him; but I must put on record his first words to me when I saw him: “Ruppen has left a young wife and several children, and they are very poor. Will you get up a subscription for them, ma’am, and help them as much as possible?” It was done, and for Roman a tombstone was erected, “By his English friends, as a mark of their appreciation of his sterling qualities as a man and a guide.” Roman was twenty-seven at the time of the accident. Neither Imboden nor I cared to face the sad associations of the Alps after the death of Roman, and the next and following years we mountaineered in Norway instead. (1903, 37)

Imboden’s words to his client cut through the pathos of the scene, as, detailing the financial hardship of Ruppen’s family, Imboden’s petition shows the necessity of guiding work for the family. Yet Le Blond’s abrupt sentencing and shifting of subject point to her emotional involvement in the situation. She is anxious to do what she can and illustrates the bond she has formed with the family over the years of climbing together.

In their accounts of her long mountaineering career and her long-established relationships with her climbing guides, Edoard Cupelin and Joseph Imboden, Elizabeth Le Blond’s mountaineering texts present a rich focus for the consideration of the relationship between the Victorian climber and the Alpine guide. The exploration and interrogation of this relationship both on and off the mountain permits a closer consideration of the assumption that the experience of climbing brings guide and client into an intimacy which dissolves temporarily the class hierarchy existing between them. Certainly, as evidence from Le Blond’s writing shows, she shared mountaineering aims, jokes and intimate domestic situations with her guides. Often the blurring or reversal of hierarchies of social class extend

beyond the climb into negotiations and decisions about future expeditions. Le Blond's gender also adds nuance to the analysis of hierarchies of social class and her texts demonstrate the human care and physical affection exhibited on the climb, which strained at the boundaries of propriety for a Victorian woman from the upper-classes. Le Blond's affection for her guides is highlighted in her demonstration of empathy with Joseph Imboden after the death of his son and the dedication of her 1904 text, *Adventures on the Roof of the World* to Imboden, to whom she notes, "My Guide and Friend for Twenty Years, I dedicate these records of a pastime in which I owe my share to his skill, courage, and helpful companionship" (1904, preface).

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<sup>1</sup> Born Elizabeth Hawkins-Whitshead, Le Blond also published under her married names of Mrs. Fred Burnaby, Mrs. Main and Mrs. Aubrey Le Blond. She is most commonly known by the name of her final husband. I will refer to her as Elizabeth Le Blond throughout this article.

<sup>2</sup> Mont Blanc had been scaled in 1854 by Mrs. Hamilton; and the following year by Emma Foreman, who also made a first female ascent of Monte Rosa in 1857; Lucy Walker (1836-1917) made the first female ascent of the Jungfrau in 1863, the Matterhorn in 1871, and the Taschorn in 1873. Meta Brevoort (1825-1876) also made significant ascents, including Mont Blanc in 1865, Monte Rosa in 1867, and a first female ascent of Grandes Jorasses in 1869. See Roche (2015, 341-343).

<sup>3</sup> In a special edition of *Sport in History*, 'Gender and British Climbing Histories', Paul Gilchrist notes, 'In the last few years we have encountered a purple patch in terms of the publication of significant cultural histories of climbing which have raised questions about masculinity, male power and the climbing body' (2013, 224). See also Neil (2000, 58-80).

<sup>4</sup> Alan McNee defines the haptic sublime as involving: 'an encounter with a mountain landscapes in which the human subject experiences close physical contact – sometimes painful or dangerous contact, sometimes exhilarating and satisfying, but always involving some kind of transcendent experience brought about through physical proximity to a rock face, ice wall, or snowy slope. (2014, 14).

<sup>5</sup> See also Williams (1973); McCrone (1988); Brown and Blum (2002); Osbourne (2004) Colley (2010).

<sup>6</sup> Other writers such as Mary Mummery, wife of Alfred Mummery, who contributed a chapter to his 1895 text, *My Climbs in the Alps and Caucasus*, include accounts of the support and skill of the party's Alpine guides, in particular their leader, Alexander Burgener, who she refers to as 'the great man of the party' (Mummery 1895, 65-95, 81).

<sup>7</sup> Braham notes that 'It should not be supposed that even during the Golden Age guiding provided even the leading men with adequate financial means' (2004, 236).

<sup>8</sup> Ronald Clark describes Joseph Imboden as 'in later year a land-owner and a man more comfortable off than most guides' (Clark 1949, 174); see also White ([date unknown, 97), who describes Imboden's 'shoemaking' heritage.

<sup>9</sup> Hansen discusses this tension between risk and financial reward in relation to Balmat and his attempt on Mont Blanc (2013, 87). More recently this was discussed in 'High-Altitude Guiding' (Steele 1999, 215).

<sup>10</sup> In Footnote 9, Alan Weber details a route to the summit of Mont Blanc and identifies Pierre Pointue and the Grands Mulets as key points (2003, 61).

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<sup>11</sup> *Alpine Journal* Volumes viii to xiii all contain discussion of guideless climbing. Reference to the debate about guideless climbing is made in ‘Alpine Controversies: A Centenary Survey’ (Lunn 1957, 144-157). See also: ‘Guides or No Guides in the Mountains?’ in the *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art*, (1870, 681-682); Hudson and Kennedy (1856); Tyndall (1871).

<sup>12</sup> Colley (2010, 108) cites Le Blond (1886, 96-7).

<sup>13</sup> See also Thompson (2010, 35) for details of how the guide ‘generally cut all the steps on snow and ice and invariably led on ice’.

<sup>14</sup> For more on the significance of *Führerbüchen* see Roche (2013, 2).

<sup>15</sup> Le Blond re-uses the latter part of this section on page 19 of *Mountaineering in the Land of the Midnight Sun* (1908).

<sup>16</sup> As detailed in *A Lady’s Tour Round Monte Rosa* (1860), [Mrs. Henry Warwick Cole], walked around the area in 1860 but did not explicitly claim to have climbed to the summit.

<sup>17</sup> For a mountain guide, Vittorio Sella had an unusually prestigious provenance; the nephew of Quintino Sella, an Italian Government minister, he became a pioneer in mountain photography (Clark 1949, 146).

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