

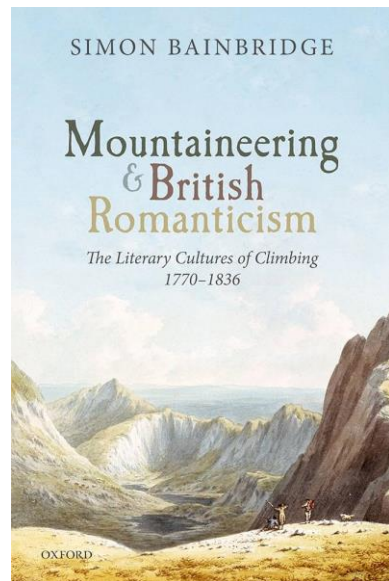
Anne D. Wallace

reads

*Mountaineering and British Romanticism:
The Literary Cultures of Climbing, 1770–1836*

by Simon Bainbridge¹

SIMON BAINBRIDGE'S EXCELLENT STUDY *Mountaineering and British Romanticism: The Literary Cultures of Climbing, 1770–1836* decisively 'relocate[s] the origins of British mountaineering both geographically and temporally', from the Alps to the mountains of Scotland, Wales, and England, and from the Victorian to the Romantic period (12). In wide-ranging chapters connecting poetic and fictional treatments of mountains and mountain-climbing with those in travelogues, scientific narratives, and private journals and letters, Bainbridge persuasively describes the emergence in Romantic discourse of the senses of 'mountaineering' eventually associated with Victorian alpinism. This expansive approach allows Bainbridge to engage leading issues in Romantic literary scholarship—rhetorics of transcendence and embodiment, the politics and aesthetics of the elevated view, power differentials of gender and class—while maintaining a firm connection to foundational accounts of mountain-climbing practice. Illustrative reproductions of contemporary engravings and paintings further demonstrate the growing, perhaps surprising, significance of mountain-climbing in British culture of the period. In addition to the literary scholars and present-day mountaineers it directly addresses, Bainbridge's satisfyingly detailed, sometimes provocative book offers valuable new perspectives to historians of art, science, sport, and British culture generally.



The distinctive claims of *Mountaineering and British Romanticism* might be summarized as two significant revisions of the relationship between Romantic writers and their works, and the concepts and practices of 'mountaineering' as we now use that term. One of these is a considerable enlargement of the extent and significance of that relationship: 'major writers including William and Dorothy Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Ann Radcliffe, John Keats, Lord Byron, and Walter Scott were central to [the] invention' of mountaineering 'as a pursuit' (1). Coleridge, in fact, is credited with the first recorded use of 'mountaineering' as a verb, a coinage describing his 'pioneering ascent of Scafell'

¹ Simon Bainbridge, *Mountaineering and British Romanticism: The Literary Cultures of Climbing, 1770–1836* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

in August 1802 (3). Bainbridge situates Coleridge's new usage in an ongoing shift of the noun 'mountaineer' from meaning a person native to the mountains, and therefore knowledgeable about climbing, to meaning any person 'who engages in or is skilled at mountain climbing' (3). As was true of walking during this period, mountain-climbing becomes a deliberate, aspirational activity associated with artistry: 'the desire for physical ascent shaped Romantic period literary culture [and] the figure of the mountaineer became crucial to creative identities and literary outputs' (1).

The other distinctive claim is that Romantic-period writing about mountains characteristically foregrounds 'the embodied experience of ascent and decent [sic]': 'for Wordsworth, Coleridge, and other writers of the period, high mountains were a feeling, part of a tangible world experienced by a moving, sensing body' (2). The paradigmatic Romantic literary encounter with mountains, Bainbridge argues, is not the visual, contemplative wonder of a static body—as in the frequently cited example of Percy Shelly's 'stationary poet looking at [Mont Blanc] from below and speculating about its hidden summit' (1)—but rather the difficulty and physical fear of the hands-down scramble and the arduous ascent, and the material challenges of shifting mountain weather. In these respects, mountaineering literature differs from the Romantic-period literature of walking—or more accurately, differs from scholarly analyses of that literature in which Bainbridge finds 'little distinction between walking on a level surface and ascending or descending' (2). Intending to build out from that earlier scholarship, and more broadly to expand 'conceptions of Romanticism that prioritize vision and the imagination' (2), Bainbridge lays new and illuminating stress on the Romantic mountaineer's muscular, multi-sensory experiences.

The eight chapters of *Mountaineering and British Romanticism*, consistent in their dense detail and their success in advancing the book's central claims, are in other ways rather disparate. The first four function as sets of two, the first set laying the historical groundwork for early British mountaineering and the second set tackling the vexed issue of the elevated view through comparisons of William Wordsworth's and John Keats's mountaineering writings. The last four chapters take up various threads of Romantic mountaineering as practice and ideology (the latter is my word, not Bainbridge's): fear as the essential, and non-sublime, emotional experience of mountaineering; the 'complex and ambiguous' (163) figure of the mountaineer as guide, hunter, and patriot; women and mountaineering; and Walter Scott's influential linked inflections of masculinity and mountain-climbing. Bainbridge holds these varied streams of analysis together with helpful cross-references to earlier or later chapters, so that despite one's feeling that this book was not 'written as a book', the lines of the larger argument hold firm.

Chapter one names 'three established eighteenth-century pursuits' from which British mountaineering emerged: 'scientific research, antiquarianism, and aesthetic travel' (16). Citing accounts going back into the seventeenth century, Bainbridge concisely demonstrates the early development of key 'tropes of mountaineering literature' (17)—the articulation of emotional and physical

responses to the conditions of the climb, the achievement and appreciation of the elevated view, the heroism of the mountaineer—in company with scientific and antiquarian endeavors as well as where travelers sought the picturesque or sublime aesthetic experience. Although the scholarship of Noah Heringman, Richard Sha, and others has familiarized us with the congruence in this period of what we would now separate into ‘scientific’ and ‘literary’ writing, Bainbridge’s point about these specific tropes, based in the physical and emotional effort of mountain-climbing, is fresh. Horace Benedict de Saussure (a historically inescapable detour to Alpine mountaineering) and Thomas Pennant receive special attention, but the chapter’s most persuasive evidence lies in Bainbridge’s large compilation of accounts by lesser-known mountaineers who collected botanical and climatological data, visited remote and presumably ancient sites, and sought sublime views.

The ‘Three Case Studies’ of individual mountaineers in chapter two provide a persuasive chronology of the shift from mountaineering undertaken for other purposes to the pursuit of mountain climbing, specifically summiting, as a motive in itself. Joseph Budworth, whose *A Fortnight’s Ramble to the Lakes in Westmoreland, Lancashire, and Cumberland* (1792) recounts a pedestrian tour in the ‘picturesque tradition’ (51), later took up fell-climbing—Langdale Pike, Skiddaw, and the dangerous Helm Crag—appending accounts of these climbs to later editions of *A Fortnight’s Ramble*. Budworth called ‘his pioneering ascents “curiosity walks”’, replacing the expected mountain-climbing rationales with personal aspiration or whim (55). Even more striking is the case of the Reverend William Bingley, whose *A Tour Round North Wales* of 1800 closed its account of climbing two Welsh mountains by ‘listing over thirty “uncommon plants” [with] the exclamation “What a treat for a botanist!”’ (62). Yet in Bingley’s *North Wales* of 1804 ‘this botanical interest is entirely excised’, while new passages describing ‘mountaineering excitements’ foreground ‘the physical and psychological challenges and satisfactions’ of climbing as rewards in themselves (62, 63). In John MacCulloch’s four-volume *The Highlands and Western Isles of Scotland* (1824), Bainbridge locates a conclusive shift toward ‘the idea of mountaineering as an activity undertake to overcome a challenge, test manliness, prove character, and gain honour’, ‘a heroic pursuit that enabled [the mountaineer] to claim a specific identity, articulated particularly through the language of chivalry’ (66, 64). This excellent chapter strongly makes its case that the practices and ideas of mountaineering long associated with the Victorians and the Alps were ‘fully established in Britain before Queen Victoria came to the throne’ (70).

At this point *Mountaineering and British Romanticism* makes a decided turn toward those ‘major writers’ of the Romantic period with whom Bainbridge connects the ‘invention’ of British mountaineering (1). Chapters three and four examine William Wordsworth’s and John Keats’s common perception that summiting an iconic mountain—Snowdon in 1791 and Ben Nevis in 1818—served as ‘an essential prelude or prologue to the high poetic vocations that they had identified for themselves’ (72). The summit view they sought, Bainbridge argues, was not a ‘static prospect, in which the features of the landscape are

viewed “clear and distinct”—the picturesque’s favored position of contemplative observation—but a newly valued ‘grand spectacle of nature’, a surprising, challenging view rendered fluid by atmospheric disturbance and changing light (87). Despite Wordsworth’s and Keats’s shared regard for the mountain summit as a ‘place of revelation’ (86), Bainbridge draws a sharp contrast as well: while Wordsworth ‘retrospectively made his climb [of Snowdon] the culmination of . . . “the growth of a poet’s mind”’, Keats ‘had predetermined’ that his walking to and climbing of Ben Nevis would yield ‘a transformed identity’, figuratively qualifying him as poet from the moment of summiting (103).

My summary of these central points does not do justice to Bainbridge’s rich treatment, drawing on varied auxiliary sources across more than fifty pages, of Wordsworth and Keats as mountaineers—in many ways the analytical fulcrum of *Mountaineering and British Romanticism*. I must briefly mention Bainbridge’s discussion, toward the end of chapter four, of ‘the issues of power inherent within mountaineering’, issues that Bainbridge believes the two poets ‘were themselves alert to’, so that ‘their own writings about climbing were more complex, nuanced and even ambivalent in attitude’ than some influential critiques have found (120). These questions of class and gendered power reappear again in chapters six and seven when Bainbridge considers the class differentials among varied figures of the mountaineer and the contributions of women climbers to British mountaineering literature.

In the intervening chapter, ‘Romanticism on the Rocks: Feeling and Fear in the Mountains’, Samuel Taylor Coleridge takes center stage. The chapter’s thesis contradicts the received wisdom that Romantic writings about mountains ‘failed to fully engage with either the materiality of the peaks or the embodied experience of climbing them’, relying purely on the visual for access to spiritual or imaginative transcendence (129). Instead, Bainbridge argues, the accounts of Romantic poets and mountaineers are ‘full of descriptions of embodied and hands-on movement through dangerous territory’ (130), linking the bodily difficulty and visceral fear of mountain-climbing to a potentially transcendent state. Coleridge’s letters and notebooks, including the ‘famous account of his descent of Broad Stand . . . in his letter to Sara Hutchinson of 6 August 1802’, provide the most persuasive demonstrations of this claim (140). As Bainbridge acknowledges, these private texts (like Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, which was published in 1850) could not have contributed to the development of Romantic mountaineering literature at the time: their value can only be judged retrospectively. Nonetheless, Bainbridge rates Coleridge’s mountaineering accounts as among ‘the outstanding writings of the first age of British mountaineering’ (161).

Returning to issues of differential power, chapter six considers the ‘idea of the mountaineer [as] complex and ambiguous’, including figures as varied as ‘the daring Alpine chamois hunter, and the martial Highlander’, the native mountaineer whose role is that of guide and the ‘stranger’ mountaineer who climbs for recreation (163–64). Political and economic hierarchies further

complicate these figures: the mountaineer may be a native-born freeholder resisting oppression, or a noble sojourner who embodies class distinction and monarchical power. In an especially persuasive sequence, Bainbridge draws first on Richard Warner's *A Walk through Wales in August 1797*, and then Byron's *Manfred* (1817) to illustrate the 'particular challenge' presented by the native guide, whose 'very presence on the summit called into question their employer's own lack of expertise, independence, and adventurousness' (179). It is not the Chamois Hunter's recognition of Manfred's 'mountaineering credentials', Bainbridge points out, but Manfred's 'reassertion of his class position' by paying off and dismissing the Hunter that allows Manfred to 'regain his sense of self' and continue alone on his journey (185). Such challenges to and reassertions of class/political power, which Bainbridge also identifies in Wordsworth's conflicted treatment of Lake District mountaineers in *The Excursion* (1814), seem to me more dynamic than they do to Bainbridge. But whether one sees a firmly settled advantage for the entitled or not, Bainbridge's identification of 'mountaineer' as a contested figure casts new light on important texts.

By the time we reach chapter seven, subtitled 'Women and Mountaineering', the contributions of Romantic-era women writers to mountaineering literature have been regularly cited in earlier chapters. Here Bainbridge gives focused consideration to 'women's significant contribution to the evolution of Romantic-period ascent and its literature', and to how some of these writings 'offered a strong challenge to prevailing social expectations of gender roles' (199). Besides cataloging a surprising (to me) list of women who 'participated keenly in the climbing of British mountains from as early as the 1770s', the chapter closely engages a few particularly influential women's 'ascent narratives'. Bainbridge gives extensive attention to Ann Radcliffe's 'Skiddaw' chapter in her 1795 *Observations During a Tour of the Lakes*, rating this as 'one of the best-known ascent narratives in the Romantic period, perhaps second only to Rousseau's Letter XXIII in *Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse* (206), and detailing its importance to her contemporaries Priscilla Wakefield and Sarah Murray. The chapter's closing account of Dorothy Wordsworth as 'a fascinating case study of the evolution of mountaineer and mountaineering writer' (230) is particularly thoughtful and rich, engaging Wordsworth's letters, journals, and occasional narratives over decades. Her narrative of climbing Scafell Pike with her friend Mary Barker, first set out in a letter to her friend Jane Marshall, became part of William's 1822 *Guide to the Lakes*, and then was quoted extensively and influentially, with the result that 'Dorothy played a major role in the popularization of ascent in the nineteenth century, though one that has generally been unrecognized until recently' (240).

It seems a natural transition to Walter Scott, a Wordsworth family friend and fellow traveler. Focusing on three best-selling novels, *The Antiquary* (1816), *The Pirate* (1822), and *Anne of Geierstein* (1829), Bainbridge's closing chapter persuasively details Scott's major role in forming the ideology and typology of mountain-climbing. In these novels Scott pits his 'passive heroes' (a term coined by Alexander Welsh) and their 'rock-climbing' prowess against alternative masculinities: the soldier, the pirate, and the native mountaineer as rebel (254—

55). In *Anne of Geierstein*, Bainbridge argues, Scott ‘establishes the distinction between the English “cragman” and the Swiss “mountaineer”. . . reserv[ing] the noun “mountaineer” for the native inhabitants’, whom Scott then paints as violent and scornful of law (260). Arthur, the hero of *Anne*, represents Scott’s revised version of masculinity, proving a capable cragsman through the ‘exercise of “right reason”’, the ‘manliness’ of his climbing ‘resulting from mental rather than physical effort’ (255). Like Arthur, Scott’s climbing heroes are able to resist what Bainbridge calls ‘the romance of the identity of the mountaineer’, forging instead ‘a new identity that would appeal to many of these nineteenth-century readers, that of the recreational climber who undertakes the pursuit for pleasure’ (260, 250). While Scott’s distinctive use of ‘cragman’ did not survive the etymological shift that expanded the meaning of ‘mountaineer’, his contributions to that expanded meaning were crucial.

My admiration for Bainbridge’s achievement in *Mountaineering and Romantic Culture* is no doubt evident. I am one of the scholars who wrote about the literature of walking without regarding the different implications of mountain-climbing. In fact, I made an active decision to exclude mountaineering literature from my inquiry because I could see how rich and large that literature was. (In short, I was afraid!) Now that we have this excellent study, I find myself pondering this question: what is the relationship between the literatures of walking and mountain-climbing? Bainbridge’s mountaineers not infrequently use ‘walk’ to mean ‘climb’, as in Budworth’s ‘curiosity walks’ or Dorothy Wordsworth’s references to climbing Fairfield as ‘walking’ (241, 242), so there was not yet a sharp rhetorical distinction. William Wordsworth’s and John Keats’s summit views are arrived at by walking, and *The Excursion*’s mountain experiences are embedded in a walking tour. Surely there is a more than coincidental relationship between these two important literatures of mobility, one that scholars will want to explore with *Mountaineering and British Romanticism* close at hand.