

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO MOUNTAINEERING ?

BRIAN WOOD

Some months ago I received an appeal for money. The appeal was from the Mountaineering Association, and the cause for which my aid was solicited was the provision of a mountaineering school in the Lakes. Presumably most members of the M.A.M. had similar circulars, and presumably the overwhelming majority of these circulars met the same fiery fate as mine. I have no personal animosity against the Mountaineering Association, but my charity money goes to War on Want or Oxfam; the M.A. coming just above Distressed Gentlefolk and Leonardo cartoons at the bottom of the list.

To make a public, even if limited, appeal on behalf of a mountaineering organisation seems to me to show a warping of values which indicates the decay of mountaineering as we have known and loved it. This failure to regard sport with any normal sense of proportion is by now familiar in other fields. Only recently a radio reporter referred admiringly to a table-tennis player who had paid his own fare to Prague to play there. Presumably he only went out of a sense of duty and got no pleasure from playing.

The intrusion into climbing of this spirit is one of the chief dangers which the sport faces at the present time. It is accompanied by a tendency to organisation and by a proliferation of committees, and dates, I am sure, from the ascent of Everest.

The increase in the numbers of people going climbing dates, I suppose, from the end of the war, but it was the ascent of Everest which attracted the baleful approval of officialdom. That it should do so was perhaps inevitable in view of the unfortunate timing of the event, but it certainly dealt a blow from which mountaineering is still reeling. It would perhaps have been better for the health of British climbing if the Swiss had got up first.

It has been remarked that after Everest was climbed, mountaineering was Kurt and Hahnessed to the cart of education. In the official mind, mountaineering has acquired the reputation of being character-building. Various people have encouraged this view for their own purposes, or possibly because they believe it, so that the idea of mountaineering as an activity carried on because it is essentially enjoyable is, in some circles, in danger of being forgotten.

Sadly enough, the aspect of the mountaineering sub-culture which is most in danger from these trends is the literary and historical one. It would, of course, be quite ridiculous to suggest that a knowledge of the life and works of, say, Whymper is more important than practical competence in the skills of mountaineering, but quite possibly the Outward Bounding and Edinburgh Awarding ranks might get more out of their physical activities with some knowledge of their place in the mountaineering tradition.

This is, perhaps, an over-personal view. The great charm of the Winthrop Young generation lay in their sense of style, both in literature and in life. They climbed because they enjoyed it, and strove to do it with a flourish; many young people are now shepherded into the mountains with the idea that is good for them. There is a tendency, nowadays, to think that boys may be persuaded not to cosh old ladies by taking them to the mountains. It seems more realistic to realise that boys who will love mountaineering are unlikely to cosh old ladies; the others will gain only the knowledge that they dislike mountaineering. From personal experience, I know that the difficult boy is not normally made less difficult by a mountaineering trip, character, as Jacques Boell has pointed out, is what sends a person to the mountains, not what he brings away from them.

The boy, or girl, who will enjoy mountaineering (let us not say benefit from it) will need some first introduction to the sport. This can well be by a school or youth service party. After this a local club, or even a Mountaineering Association or C.C.P.R. course is a good way of gaining experience, but the whole thing must surely be done for fun and pleasure, not as a physical or mental toughening-up course. It seems to me particularly wrong to award medals in connection with mountaineering or to use mountaineering as a criterion of moral fibre. The latter course is not only nauseatingly silly, but quite obviously inefficient. A rapid review of one's acquaintance makes it very clear that there is no positive correlation between mountaineering skill and high moral principles.

Mountaineering has always been bedevilled by this feeling that it should be done for some reason other than its own sake. The early climbers, slinking off with their alpenstocks, muttered into their beards about science when people asked, as they still do, why they wanted to go up mountains. Nowadays it is character training; we have lost the ability, characteristic again of the Winthrop Young age, to say openly that we do it out of pure, selfish enjoyment, with no wish to be improved or to improve others.

People often wonder what is going to happen to mountaineering. Every year the number in the mountains is greater. Greater numbers of mountaineers bring with them a higher accident rate, so that conversation is sometimes impossible at Bank Holidays for the thud of falling bodies. This in its turn causes, in certain circles, an excessive preoccupation with safety. So many school parties are now seen in the mountains that even the school-master is unable to go there at an off-peak season. Mountaineering, one fears at times, has been swamped.

We can, however, take heart. This flood of young people is to a large extent the result of educational pressure, and education is notoriously dominated by fashion. A few years may see the flood

channelled off to small boat sailing or to canoeing. We shall, I suspect, yet see the mountains once more empty and quiet, when the uproar of Everest has subsided.



The Road to the Hills