

ALPINE CONTROVERSIES: A CENTENARY SURVEY

By ARNOLD LUNN

(Being the substance of a talk to the Alpine Club on June 4th, 1957)

MY theme this evening has evoked two reactions, of which the first was encouraging. The Editor wrote : ' Just the stuff for the Centenary A.J., amiably malicious, slightly scurrilous, a pulling down of the puffed up, an encouragement to rebels and a pricking of pomposities.' The second reaction was more conventional. ' Why dig up all those old controversies ? Surely they're better forgotten.' This faintly censorious attitude to controversy is comparatively modern. In the Middle Ages controversy was honoured as an important technique which should be mastered by all who were ambitious to refute error and to defend truth. Indeed, in the medieval universities organised dialectics fulfilled much the same functions as organised sport in modern Oxford or Cambridge. The brilliant undergraduate who could hold his own in public disputation enjoyed a prestige at least as great as that of a Blue.

This medieval passion for dialectics sometimes led to rather futile disputations, with the result that our own English folklore has been enriched by the myth that medieval philosophers spent their time arguing about how many angels could dance on the point of a needle, a myth which originated in the jibe of a seventeenth-century divine, William Chillingworth; but those who believe in the value of controversy can quote an important tribute to the medieval controversialists. That distinguished mathematical philosopher, the late Professor A. N. Whitehead, F.R.S., was much impressed by what he called 'the contribution of medievalism to the formation of the scientific movement'. 'The habit', wrote Whitehead, 'of definite exact thought was implanted in the European mind by the long dominance of scholastic logic and scholastic divinity. The habit remained long after the philosophy had been repudiated, the priceless habit of looking for an exact point and of sticking to it when found.' If our own alpine controversialists had been trained in as exacting a school, many of our controversies might have gained in light what they lost in heat. Controversy has its code no less than sport, and there is no more reason why a controversy should end in a quarrel than a football match in a fight, but it must be admitted that the *odium Alpinum* sometimes reminds a student of Church history of the *odium Theologicum*.

Our alpine controversies have been in the main beneficial to the sport, but no good came of the daisy chain of alpine feuds, the first links in which were provided by the alpine scientists. Forbes quarrelled with Agassiz, and Tyndall with both Forbes and Whymper. Whymper quarrelled with Coolidge, and Coolidge, lord of battles, feuded with any mountaineer prominent enough to be deemed worthy of his attention. Coolidge, indeed, could do anything with a hatchet except bury it.

Tyndall's attack on Forbes profoundly shocked the Alpine Club and lost Tyndall the Presidency. Forbes' temperate reply was completely convincing, but Tyndall refused either to withdraw or to prove his charges. Instead he took refuge in a formula very popular with controversialists in distress, the smug pretence of disapproving of controversy as such. 'I have refrained', he wrote, 'from answering my distinguished censor, not from inability to do so, but because I thought and think that, within the limits of the case, it is better to submit to misconceptions rather than to make science the field of personal controversy.'

In Tyndall's case, as in others, vanity was the decisive factor in the transformation of his controversies into feuds. A less vain man would certainly not have resigned from the A.C. in protest against Leslie Stephen's good-humoured jibes about mountaineers who associated mountaineering with science.

Again, no mountaineer was more quarrelsome than Coolidge, and no man could possibly have been vainer. Anything which is the best of its kind, even vanity, commands a certain uneasy respect, and I confess to having been faintly impressed by Coolidge's audacity in reprinting his entry in *Who's Who* and circulating it as a Christmas card to his friends.

In mountaineering he was a rigid conservative, determined to conserve unchanged the type of mountaineering in which alone he could hope for success. He could not have led a guideless party up the easiest of peaks and he strongly disapproved of guideless climbing. He had made many first winter ascents and had a great respect for winter mountaineering. He did not ski and had no respect for ski-mountaineering. He had only climbed in the Alps, and it was 'difficult', as Freshfield remarked in his obituary notice, 'to induce him to take any interest in any range outside the Alps; even the assault on Mount Everest failed to stir him'. He was the most erudite of alpine historians and he was generous in his appreciation of his own erudition. His pedestrian prose was excruciatingly dull, and he was therefore, to quote Freshfield once again, 'intolerant of any attempt at aesthetic description'.

Fallen man is inevitably tempted to preach what he can practise and to resent the raising of standards above a level which he can himself attain. The alpine variant of this universal failing might be defined as the 'Coolidge complex', but I do not myself believe that this

particular complex has been a very important factor in our historic controversies—as, for instance, in the controversy about guideless climbing. The occasion which provoked the Club to pass a resolution condemning guideless climbing was the publication by the Rev. A. G. Girdlestone of his book *The High Alps without Guides*. Girdlestone was a plucky but incompetent mountaineer, and his misadventures on easy expeditions were bad propaganda for guideless climbing. In 1870 when the Club discussed Girdlestone's book the immense prejudice created by the Matterhorn accident of 1865 had by no means evaporated. The leaders of the Alpine Club were for the most part men of position and were sensitive to the charge of irresponsible foolhardiness. Moreover, anything which tended to bring the sport into disrepute made it more difficult for the Club to attract desirable recruits. The A.C., the mother-club of mountaineering, was very conscious of her responsibility for the elimination of unnecessary risks, and this concern for traditions which the Club helped to create was, in the main, disinterested. In the main, for there were occasional incidents, such as the blackballing of Mummery, for which the 'Coolidge complex' was responsible, but Colonel E. L. Strutt was far more typical of alpine conservatives than Coolidge. Strutt, who was President of the Club from 1935-7 and Editor of the *ALPINE JOURNAL* from 1927-37, was notorious for his stubborn resistance to innovations, ski-mountaineering, crampons and artificial climbing, but no mountaineer could have been more disinterested in his criticism of deviations from what he considered sound mountaineering. He signalled his appointment as Editor of the *ALPINE JOURNAL* by a devastating attack on *himself*. A party of which he was the leader had narrowly escaped death, and Strutt condemned in scathing terms, which were certainly far too scathing, his own errors of judgment. Nobody who had read that article could ever question the disinterested sincerity of Strutt's criticism of what he considered to be bad mountaineering. Alpine conservatives may indeed be divided into two classes : those who, like Coolidge, are critical of innovations because they are concerned for their own reputation, and those who, like Strutt, are critical of innovations because they are concerned for the reputation of the sport ; and fortunately the disinterested conservatives have been in a great majority.

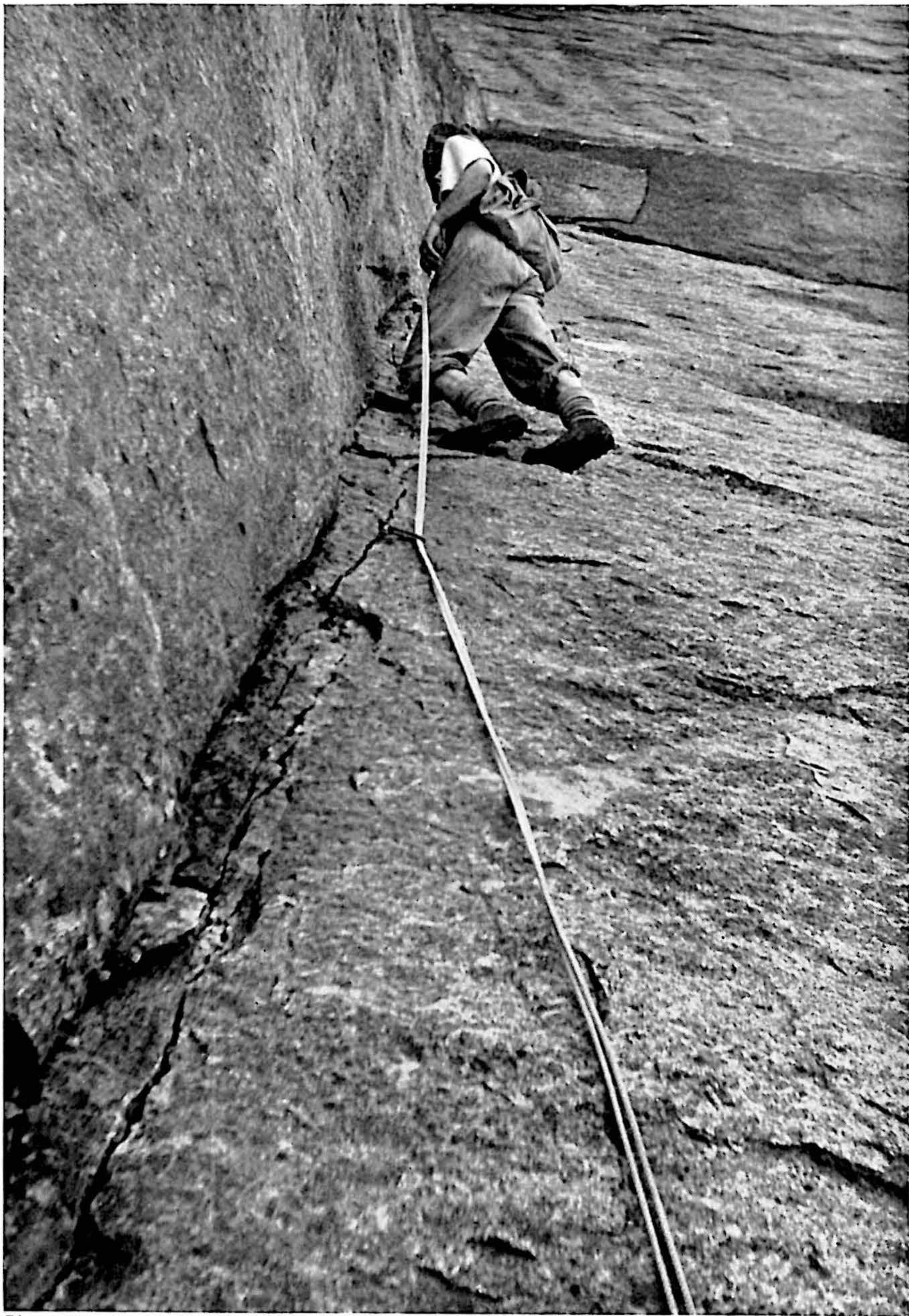
As a young man I found myself involved in an argument with Colonel Strutt on the value of ski in mountaineering. He had been unduly impressed by the 'ludicrous spectacle and unsafe proceeding' of a party of incompetent skiers whom he saw descending a glacier on a rope. Mr. Coolidge's contribution to this controversy in *The Field* was an accurate calculation of my age, deduced from my writings. If I had been at the time a member of the Alpine Club I should have found it easier to break down the prejudice against ski-mountaineering, but, as

it was, the Alpine Club was as irritated by the attempts of a young heretic outside the charmed circle to contribute something to the development of mountaineering in winter as were the Norwegians some years later by my propaganda for downhill and slalom racing. Moreover, I was so tactless as to insist that a skier's knowledge of showcraft was necessarily far greater than that of the foot-climber. In the days when election to the Club was decided by a secret ballot, the pundits had their own technique for dealing with aggressive controversialists, a technique which in due course provoked another controversy and led to a change of rules which placed the election of members in the hands of the Committee.

When ski-mountaineering was accepted, the critics of skiers changed their ground. Ski were all right if used to climb mountains, but all wrong if employed to race down them, and I found myself criticised as an iconoclast who encouraged ski philistines to desecrate the mountains, a swift descent of which was, it seemed, as irreverent as whistling in church. 'Don't you realise', one of our alpine mystics wrote to me, 'that mountains are meant to be worshipped and not treated as slides.' But are mountains meant to be worshipped? I think not, for I agree with Michael Roberts that 'mountains may be the symbols of some other reality, but the worship of symbols as if they were something more than images is a form of superstition'.

Far more important than the short-lived controversy about ski-ing is the controversy about artificial climbing. Though I am not one of those who believe that sin came into our mountain world when the first piton was planted in the Rock-garden of Eden, I sympathise with the traditionalists who feel that some of the romance has gone out of mountaineering now that the word 'inaccessible' has been banished from our vocabulary, and who deplore the fact that any cliff can be climbed by those who have enough pitons and enough time to return every night to the foot of the cliff, and resume their engineering next day until a piton ladder is completed to the summit. On the other hand, I also sympathise with the moderns who maintain that now that every great virgin ridge or face in the Alps that is climbable without pitons has been climbed, it is ridiculous to complain that pitons should be used in the conquest of new routes. Indeed, the piton controversy seems to me an excellent illustration of Hegel's definition of tragedy, 'the conflict not between Right and Wrong, but between Right and Right'. Perhaps we can arrive at a Hegelian concordat by accepting Geoffrey Young's suggestion that 'continuous contact with the natural mountain surface should be the final criterion of "mountaineering" proper. All other exercises upon prepared surfaces may well pass as just "climbing".'¹

¹ *Snowdon Biography*, p. 54.



Photo, R. R. E. Chorley]

I. G. McNAUGHT-DAVIS LEADING THE FIRST DIÈDRE ON THE NORTH FACE
OF PIZ BADILE.

[To face p. 148.

One may accept this distinction, and feel that the contrast between 'mountaineering' and 'climbing' corresponds to the Spenglerian contrast between 'culture' and 'civilisation', and yet dissociate oneself from those who adopt a censorious attitude to these modern developments, for the mastery of any technique which is, as artificial climbing certainly is, an exacting test of courage and skill should command respect. We do not climb mountains as a religious rite or civic duty but to please ourselves, and a form of climbing which gives pleasure to its devotees even if it gives none to us is only open to criticism if it renders the mountains less pleasurable for other people, as is indeed the case when pitons are not removed from pitches which have been and can be climbed without their aid. Perhaps Miss Nancy Mitford could be persuaded to publish an Alpine supplement to *Noblesse Oblige* in which U and non-U might be translated into their mountaineering equivalents, Mu and non-Mu. Failure to remove pitons from pitches where they were unnecessary would be classified as definitely non-Mu.

We are indebted for the liveliest and most recent of alpine controversies to the late Geoffrey Howard, wittiest and most urbane of debaters. His main concern, I feel, was to ventilate the subject rather than to condemn indiscriminately anything which could be classified as 'Alpine Uplift'. I believe, for instance, that Howard would have found himself in general agreement with Geoffrey Young's notable contribution to *The Mountain World* (1955). 'To the young scientific mind in this "machine age",' writes Young, 'the muscular movements in climbing are mechanical, explicable and therefore sympathetic when described', and because it is much easier to record the physical details of a climb than to interpret the emotions of the climb, there is, as Young observes, 'a tendency to condemn any writing which is not technical and impersonal as sentimentality, a superfluous display of emotion', a tendency which may be nothing more than a recurrence of the Coolidge complex.

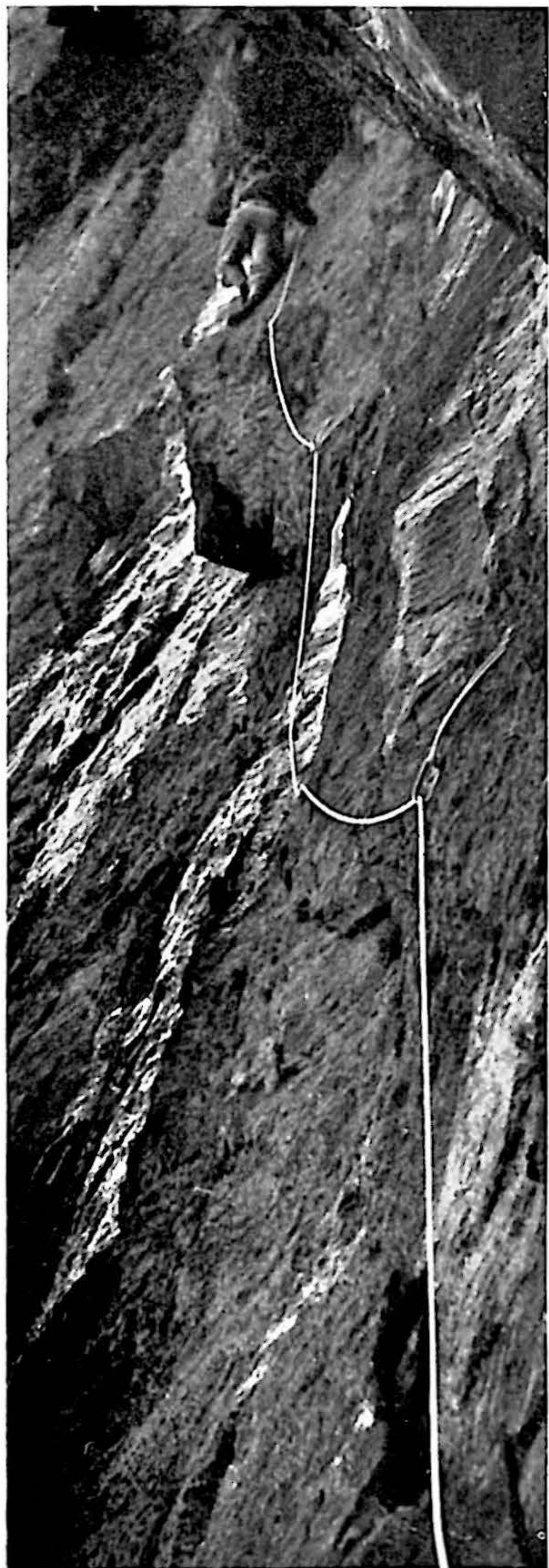
It is odd that those who dismiss all criticisms of modern innovations as inspired by dislike of anything which raises standards above a level which they can themselves attain should never suspect that others might explain as an analogous manifestation of the Coolidge complex their own reaction to standards of mountain writing unattainable by most of us. There is of course nothing new in the resentment which nature mysticism provokes. Jeffrey indeed anticipated the attack on 'Alpine Uplift' by his contemptuous criticism of the greatest of the lake poets, William Wordsworth. 'His effusions', he wrote, 'on what may be called the physiognomy of external Nature, or its moral and theological expression, are eminently fantastic, obscure and affected.'

Nobody is under any obligation to read anything which displeases him, and nobody has any right to grumble at the publication in the ALPINE

JOURNAL or elsewhere of articles which give great pleasure, if only to a minority. One of the charms of alpine literature is its diversity. Those who prefer a climb to be described in the style of an engineer's report are well catered for, but our literature would be sadly impoverished if no mountaineer had ever tried to interpret the spiritual significance of mountain beauty. Instead of condemning Alpine Uplift as such, it would be more helpful if we tried to establish the criteria which enable us to distinguish between effective and ineffective attempts to interpret our response to mountain beauty and mountain adventure. I suggest that all such attempts are of value, whether the writer be a Christian, Buddhist, pantheist or atheist, provided that his writing is distinguished by the note of clarity and the note of integrity. Clarity because no man can convey to the reader what is not clear to himself. '*La Religione è precisa*', writes Croce, '*e la Religiosità è vaga*.' There are many passages in our literature which illustrate Croce's contrast between the precision of religion and the vagueness of religiosity. As, for instance, the following passage from an author who has few rivals as an interpreter of mountain adventure but who is less convincing as a mountain philosopher : 'Those who are impelled towards the hills seek something finer than the man-made dogmas now crushing and distracting the spiritual teachings of the universe . . . the religion of the mountains is not one of cant or ritual.' In the same book there is a brilliant description of a narrow escape, which concludes with the words : 'We shook hands for it had been a close thing.' But what is a handshake but ritual ? It is indeed ritual which differentiates man from the beasts. When dogs meet dogs there is no shaking of paws, and bees do not curtsy to queen bees.

The vagueness of alpine religiosity is mainly due to fashion. Nancy Mitford has given examples of words which were once U and which are now non-U, and similar changes can be traced in alpine literature. The founding fathers of our sport were uninhibited by the shyness which paralyses many of our alpine mystics when their argument seems to require some reference to the Architect of the hills. Men like Alfred Wills or Charles Hudson or Julius Elliott could refer in the most blatant fashion to their Creator in papers contributed to the ALPINE JOURNAL without provoking that embarrassment from which the non-Mu element among my readers will suffer at this paragraph.

Whereas references to the Creator were once Mu and are now non-Mu, other words which were once regarded as non-Mu are in the process of becoming Mu, for I am sure the present Editor would not fake a facsimile letter to transform the word 'bloody' into 'beastly', a transformation which you can check for yourselves, if you compare Mallory's last letter which hangs in our club-rooms with the facsimile frontispiece to the ALPINE JOURNAL for 1925. This recalls a sad experience of my



Photo, E. A. Wrangham]

RED SLAB, WEST BUTTRESS, CLOGWYN DU'R ARDDU.

youth. The publishers of my book *The Harrovians* insisted that a word which I had introduced to give versimilitude to my dialogue should be deleted and 'ruddy' substituted throughout for 'bloody'. Worse still, they refused to insert a suggested erratum slip : 'On page 45, line 3, *for* "bloody", *read* "ruddy" '.

Let me bring this review of controversies to an end with a brief discussion of our attitude to competitive mountaineering. Fifty years ago it was still possible for us to deny that competitive mountaineering was anything but a rare and regrettable phenomenon, and we have continued ever since to record sincere but completely unavailing protests against the exploitation of mountaineering successes in the interests of national aggrandisement. Continental historians, it is true, have sometimes implied that even if we did not blow our own trumpets we breathed down them with considerable effect, but Lehner and Carl Egger between them have not managed to scrape together more than three or four examples of anything which could be construed as chauvinism ; the most obvious of such examples being the absurd and now abandoned claim that Wills' ascent of the Wetterhorn marked the beginnings of sporting mountaineering.

Mountaineering is a dangerous sport and the casualty rate appears to rise from year to year. Competitive mountaineering, whether between individuals or nations, can easily degenerate into a gamble with death. The de-emphasis of national rivalries which is part of our tradition is clearly in the best interests of the sport, and there is no inconsistency between the decent pride which we feel in the achievements of our own countrymen and a determination to stress the bonds which should unite all members of the mountain brotherhood. The Kandahar Club has done what it could to adapt this policy to ski-ing, with the result that the Arlberg-Kandahar, the only race at which no national flags are flown other than the flag of the country in which the race is held, and at which no national anthems are played at prize-givings, is by far the friendliest of the first-class events.

In conclusion let me confess to an uneasy suspicion that I have failed to provide the acid looked for by the Editor. There is nothing which could be described as even 'slightly scurrilous' or 'amiably malicious'. The truth is that I am growing old and respectable. You will remember Alexander Selkirk's complaint about the animals on his desert island : 'Their tameness is shocking to me', and I fear your Editor will be no less shocked by an unexpected mildness. Be that as it may, I shall be sad if this revival of old controversies does not provoke a discussion as lively as that which was my reward when I last trailed my somewhat faded coat before the members of this august society.