Sir Arnold Lunn (1888–1974)

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(*Plate* 95)

Arnold Lunn, whose centenary fell in 1988, was perhaps the most unusual and certainly one of the most distinguished Honorary Members of the Alpine Club. Mountaineer, ski-pioneer, tireless author and controversialist, fearless Christian apologist – what can be put into 1500 words that is not either already too well known or else totally inadequate? A few highlights at most. I only knew him a little – several meetings at AC functions, some correspondence over a contribution to one of his books and a delightful meeting at Mürren when skiing with his cherished friends Harold and Molly Davis – all towards the end of his life, but much better than not to have known him at all.

I think it would be true to say that his life revolved around three main themes – love of friends and family, mountains and thirdly (but he always put it first) his Christian faith. Three main themes, yes, but buttressed with a thousand lesser enthusiasms, each accurately compartmented in his otherwise notoriously absent-minded brain. In attempting to write briefly about each theme, I will mention some of his many books as appropriate.

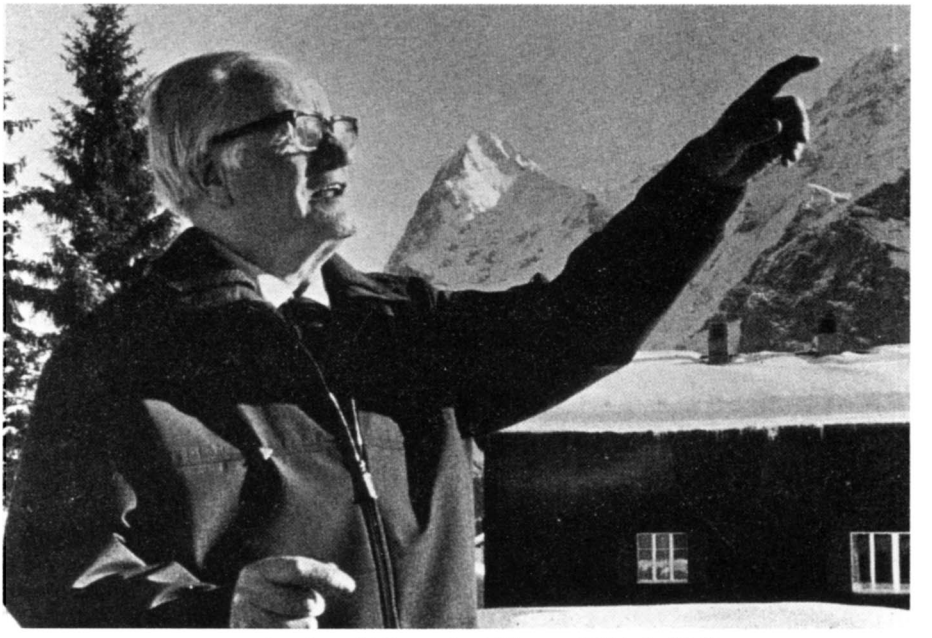
On the first, I can only join with all his other friends in saying that the warm memories of his presence have not faded with the years. As James Riddell could say in his obituary (*AJ80*, 298, 1975) '. . . all my memories of Arni are connected with fun and laughter . . . Even if one argued with him . . . it always ended up in laughter.'

His passion for the hills dated from early days at the Lunn holiday home in Grindelwald, where he and his brothers very soon christened a local 30-foot boulder 'Hill Difficulty', making routes up every face whenever they could steal away from the nurse detailed to guard them. When aged 10, in 1898, Arnold learnt to ski at Chamonix, on primitive equipment. At Oxford he founded the Oxford University Mountaineering Club and became editor of a famous book, *Oxford Mountaineering Essays*, whose contributors included, besides himself, Julian Huxley, Hugh Kingsmill, H E G Tyndale and N R Pope. In 1909 he traversed the Bernese Alps – one of the first major ski-mountaineering journeys on record. Later the same year, on Cader Idris, he smashed his leg in a 100-foot fall when a rock flake he was holding broke away. The leg remained permanently two inches short and the wound did not heal for 11 years. Two years after the accident he climbed the Dent Blanche in 10 hours from the hut, triumphing over great pain; and thereafter he concentrated more and more on skiing as his means of mountain travel.

This is no place to dwell on his fame in the world of skiing. Let the titles, generic and otherwise, by which he came to be known tell their own tale: Father of Downhill Skiing, Ambassador of the Mountains, Inventor of the Slalom,



94. *A M Kellas (1862–1921).* (p 207)



95. *Sir Arnold Lunn in Mürren, 1974.* (p 214)

President of the Ski Club of Great Britain and Founder of the Alpine Ski Club and the Kandahar – to say nothing of the *British Ski Year Book* which he started in 1920 and edited without a break until he died. And it was 'Services to skiing and to Anglo-Swiss relations' which earned him his knighthood in 1952.

In all, Arnold wrote about 60 books – not only about mountains and Christianity but also about politics, especially those which threatened the freedom of the hills such as the Nazi competitive and nationalistic climbing which preceded the Second World War. His firm stand in withdrawing the Arlberg-Kandahar Race from St Anton at the time of the 1938 Anschluss, in protest against the arrest of Hannes Schneider (his friend and partner in promoting the race), resulted in the latter's release to go to America but not – as the Nazis had hoped – in the return of the race to St Anton; this only happened after the end of the war.

Amongst all Arnold's works there was only one which he considered likely to survive as literature: *The Mountains of Youth*. Written in 1925, this was the book reviewed by Sir Martin Conway (*AJ38*, 140–141, 1926) in the words 'ought to take high rank among the best books ever written about mountaineering'. But amongst those I read myself, I would judge at least two others especially likely to live on: *A Century of Mountaineering* (the Centenary Volume, and so far the only history of the Alpine Club, 1957); and his splendidly reasoned defence of the Resurrection of Jesus, *The Third Day* (1945). His autobiographical works, *Come What May* and *Unkilled for So Long*, are also alive with interest. And of course there was *The Harrovians* (1913), which set a new trend in school stories but was dismissed by the Church Times with 'there is no excuse for Mr Lunn', and for which he is said to have been blackballed by three clubs! As all know, the Alpine Club – to its shame – treated him in the same way, despite his sponsorship by the current President. Arnold felt this deeply at the time, consoling himself with the thought that no one living had the power to exclude him from the deeper fellowship to which every true mountain-lover belongs. Later in life, he would describe himself, not without relish, as an HOB member of the Club. I leave the reader to work that one out.

No account of AL can omit reference to his prowess and indomitable courage in controversy and debate, always conducted with good humour, and the more endearing since he preferred – and nearly always took on – opponents and causes apparently stronger than himself. Mention has already been made of his successful confrontation with the Nazis at St Anton in 1938; others abound, such as the long battle for recognition and Olympic inclusion of downhill and slalom racing against the Norwegian inventors of the sport. It is said that their opposition collapsed when one of them remarked: 'We Norwegians were born with skis on our feet!' and AL riposted: 'That must be very awkward for your midwives.' He also contended with intellects which he considered superior to his own. Monsignor Ronald Knox, who eventually led him to become a Catholic (*Difficulties*, 1932); Professor C E M Joad, who became a Christian as a result of their debate (*Is Christianity True*, 1933); and J B S Haldane, who did not (*Science and the Supernatural*, 1935).

Arnold hated double standards and what he called 'fake alternatives' –

red herrings dragged up to confuse an argument with which they were unconnected – and he was quick to detect and expose the smallest whiff of dishonesty. He particularly disliked what he used to describe as 'selective indignation' – meaning to condemn in the weak what is condoned in the strong. On such a basis he fought his long fight with the Olympic Committee against 'shamateurism' which, though uncrowned by success, will not go unremembered.

The legend abounds with stories – there seems to be about as much 'Arnistory' as 'Churchilliana' – and it may not be inappropriate to include one or two of them in this peripatetic memoir.

At Oxford, despite being Secretary of the Union, he did not obtain a degree; partly, it is said, because he replied to an examination question about the social atmosphere of the court of James I with the couplet: 'No nice examiner would ever dream – To set a question on this sordid theme.' Then there was the lecture in the United States when he was introduced to the amazed and enthusiastic audience as the author of a guidebook on Montana. He failed to enlighten his hearers that the Montana in question was of course in Switzerland. He loved telling anecdotes and saying things against himself – such as: 'When it comes to humility, I'm tops,' or 'Pack your rucksack aided by the lively sense of fear we all possess.' Once, when travelling in America, he happened to meet a priest who advised him in the course of conversation to read a book called *A Saint in the Slave Trade*. 'It will do you good', said the priest. 'Ah', replied Arnold, 'it might, if I didn't know the author!' He always said that he had become a Catholic in spite of Torquemada, and had remained one in spite of Arnold Lunn.

At his requiem in Westminster Cathedral, Cardinal Heenan described Arnold as 'A great controversialist who did not allow sport to become a religion – whom mountains taught the emptiness of atheism.' After his death his wife found the following prayer hidden away amongst his things; it makes a fitting conclusion to this tribute:

> *Let me give thanks, dear Lord, in the frailty of age for the beloved mountains of my youth, for the challenge of rock and for the joy of skiing, for the friends with whom I have climbed and ski'd, and above all, dear Lord, for those moments of revelation when the temporal beauty of the mountains reinforces my faith in the Eternal beauty which is not subject to decay.*