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Edward Lisle Strutt

A Portrait

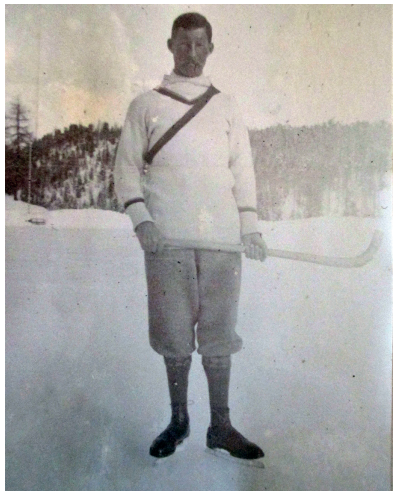
Lt Col Edward Lisle Strutt's portrait as president of the Alpine Club.

'Inflexible in opinion, outspoken and totally unmoved by the changing times through which he lived'[1], 'a complex and difficult man, certain of his own opinions… pompous and arrogant;'[2] 'he is remembered not for his climbing or his absorbing journals but for his virulent antipathies.'[3] This is a short selection from numerous similar epithets applied to Lt Col Edward Lisle Strutt (1874-1948), 'Bill' to his friends, editor of the *Alpine Journal* from 1927 to 1937 and president of the Club from 1935 to 1937.

1. W Unsworth, *Everest*, 3rd ed, London, Bâton Wicks, 2000, p72.
2. W Davis, *Into the Silence*, London, Bodley Head, 2011, p379.
3. S Goodwin, 'The Alpine Journal: A Century and a Half of Mountaineering History', *Himalayan Journal* 60, 1.

Strutt on Everest in 1922, sitting on Charles Bruce's left. 'It may possibly be,' Bruce said of Strutt, 'that we are a little too young for him.'

Strutt's mother made sure he was raised a Catholic, despite his father, who died in an industrial accident when Strutt was three, insisting on him being raised an Anglican.



At St Moritz in 1904. 'Life for a member of the leisured upper class in Edwardian England remained most agreeable.'

In the years between the wars the Alpine Club lost the leadership of the alpine world and Strutt's reactionary views, expressed intemperately in the pages of the *Journal*, contributed to the decline in the Club's prestige. He railed against the new techniques and attitudes being adopted, especially by continental climbers: the 'foolish variation' that was Welzenbach's direct

route up the north face of the Dent d'Hérens, the 'mechanisation' involved in Comici's ascent of the north face of the Cima Grande – 'a repulsive farce' – and the 'suicidal follies' of those attempting the Eigerwand. As Jack Longland, a leading British mountaineer of the period and future president of the Alpine Club, observed:

> *The Alpine Journal still spoke with enormous authority, but the trouble was not only that it spoke with dislike of much that was happening, but that many people simply stopped listening!*[4]

Who was this man, under whose editorship the *Journal* 'too often appeared in the role of a shocked and censorious maiden aunt, appalled by the immoral goings-on of the younger generation'?[5] From the outset Strutt enjoyed every advantage that resulted from wealth and rank in late Victorian England. During his birth in 1874, at Milford House in Derbyshire, his mother, like the Queen some years earlier, was given chloroform to ease the pain of childbirth; 'one bottle was used and a second begun which had the most marvellous effect' with the result that 'she was wonderfully well and the baby too.'[6] His father, the Hon Arthur Strutt, was the second son of the 1st Baron Belper, local magnate and Liberal politician. The Strutt fortune, on which the family's position was based, had been made from cotton by Lord Belper's grandfather, Jedediah: inventor, business partner of Arkwright and mill-owner. The early generations of Strutts had been nonconformists though later generations had moved towards the established Church of England. Strutt's mother Alice[7] was Roman Catholic; her father, Ambrose Phillipps, had converted to Catholicism and devoted his energy and wealth to the cause of reconciling the Anglican church with Rome. Lord Belper was adamant that any sons of Arthur and Alice be brought up as Anglicans and Strutt was duly baptised an Anglican but when he was aged three, his father died in a gruesome accident at the family mill, crushed between the large wheel and a smaller one. After that his mother raised him a Catholic.

In 1887, aged 13, he was sent to Beaumont College, a Society of Jesus boarding school in Windsor, founded 15 years earlier to provide a gentler alternative to the rigours of the society's Lancashire fortress of Stonyhurst. His time at the school coincided with its 'glittering period of fashionable success'[8], when it was considered the Catholic alternative to Eton. During this period the school roll included a sprinkling of sons of peers and important squires, dispossessed claimants to the thrones of France and Spain and

4. J Longland, 'Between the Wars 1919-39', *Alpine Journal* vol 62, p88.
5. Ibid.
6. L Phillipps de Lisle, Strutt's maternal grandmother, quoted in M Pawley, *Faith & Family: the life and circle of Ambrose Phillipps de Lisle*, Norwich, Canterbury Press, 1993, p358.
7. Alice was one of 16 siblings. Strutt's uncles included Everard, who had been killed in the Indian Mutiny and was awarded a posthumous VC, Rudolph, killed in 1885 in the 15m battle of Abu Klea in the Sudan, which also did for the adventurer Fred Burnaby and was immortalised by Henry Newbolt, and Edwin who became an MP. Three aunts became nuns.
8. P Levi, *Beaumont*, London, Deutsch, 1961, p25.

three or four Spanish dukes. Throughout his life, Strutt would enjoy 'the freemasonry of titled and Catholic families abroad, especially in Austria.'[9]

From Beaumont he went to the University of Innsbruck, enrolling as a student in 1892, and it was here, presumably, he developed his facility for languages, becoming fluent in German and French and well versed in Italian. Although now 18, he was placed in the charge of Beatrice Tomasson[10], an English governess living in Innsbruck. Fifteen years his senior, she had established her credentials as a private tutor and companion in the households of Prussian generals. She was also a mountaineer and they climbed together with guides during two seasons in the Austrian Alps; their relationship gave rise to the quip, 'the student eloped with his governess.'[11]

In 1893 Strutt went up to Oxford. His college, Christ Church, was favoured by the nobility and the wealthy, and his Oxford was that of *Sinister Street* and *Zuleika Dobson*, when academic ambitions were not great and undergraduates devoted themselves to the art of living. The welcoming speech given by Compton Mackenzie's fictional head of college is barely parody:

> *You have come to Oxford,' he concluded, 'some of you to hunt foxes, some of you to wear very large and very unusual overcoats, some of you to row for your college and a few of you to work. But all of you have come to Oxford to remain English gentlemen.*[12]

Undergraduates were generally rowdy and frequently boorish; while Strutt was in residence, members of the notorious Bullingdon Club smashed all the windows in Christ Church's Peckwater Quad. Amongst his contemporaries were two other future presidents of the Alpine Club: Tom Longstaff, also at Christ Church, who took a third in physiology, and Leo Amery, at Balliol, who with the excuse of his recent first in Classical Mods, 'gave over the summer term of 1894 to idling on the Cherwell in punt or canoe and to all the innumerable diversions which can make Oxford so delightful to those who wish to study life rather than books.'[13] But Strutt was not seduced by Oxford's charms; perhaps they seemed too juvenile and frivolous. Commenting some years later on Strutt's aloofness, Gen Charles Bruce, whose sense of fun could be distinctly childish, observed, 'It may possibly be that we are a little too young for him'[14]. Strutt did not return to Oxford after completing his first year and thus took no degree.

Possessing independent means, Strutt had no need of employment but in 1898, aged 24, he took up part-time soldiering and this remained his principal occupation until he was compulsorily retired in 1921. He was commissioned into the 3rd Battalion (Militia) of the Royal Scots, the oldest and senior infantry regiment of the line of the British Army. Although pur-

9. T Blakeney, 'The Alpine Journal and its Editors III', *Alpine Journal*, vol 81, p153.
10. Beatrice Tomasson (1859-1947). In 1901 she made the first ascent of the south face of the Marmolada with the guides Bettega and Zagonel.
11. H Reisach, 'Beatrice Tomasson and the South Face of the Marmolada', *Alpine Journal* vol 106, p107.
12. E M Compton Mackenzie, *Sinister Street*, London, Macdonald and Jane's, 1978, p421.
13. L Amery, *Days of Fresh Air*, London, Jarrolds, 1939, p31.
14. C Bruce, quoted in Unsworth, *op cit*, p72.

chase of commissions had been abolished, the high cost of living for officers ensured the social exclusivity of the officer corps and Strutt's fellow officers in the battalion included a marquis and three sons of the Duke of Buccleuch. On the eve of the Boer War, it is inconceivable that a young officer with Strutt's upbringing felt anything but confidence in his place and the position of Great Britain in the world.

In March 1900, Strutt, newly promoted captain, embarked for South Africa. Being a militia battalion, the 3rd was not obliged to serve abroad. Nevertheless, all but four men had volunteered. By August the war seemed to the British won, but it had merely entered a new phase of guerrilla fighting, which continued for almost two years. Strutt's battalion formed part of a mobile column, its duties mainly connected with protecting lines of communication but it also took part in the 'Great de Wet Hunt', during which the elusive Boer commander and his two thousand men evaded the attentions of 15,000 British troops. Strutt was mentioned in dispatches. The battalion returned to England at the end of July 1902 and within 10 days the regimental cricket XI, of which Strutt was a member, had, in a surprising display of ingenuousness or insouciance – Strutt considered it sportsmanship – proceeded to Holland, largely pro-Boer and anti-British, to play matches against Haarlem and the Gentlemen of Holland, winning the first and narrowly losing the second. The team was promptly ordered home to avert a diplomatic row.

Reflecting on the war 30 years later and exhibiting a by then well-developed chauvinism, Strutt wrote in an exculpatory obituary of Lord Methuen[15], whose generalship had been disastrous, that in contrast to the 'imbecilities' of France and Germany in their small colonial wars in Africa, 'it remains a solid fact that the South African war … was a well-conducted affair. Moreover it was fought against a well-armed, gallant and *white* [his italics] enemy.'[16] But Britain's prestige had undeniably been dented and the nation's self-confidence, celebrated five years earlier at Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, that festival of Empire, wobbled. Nevertheless, in the decade leading up to the First World War life for a member of the leisured upper class in Edwardian England remained most agreeable. Strutt, tall, good-looking, immaculately dressed, down to the tassels on his socks, appeared to the Italian Count Aldo Bonacossa 'altogether … the typical English gentleman.'[17] And 'the virtue' of such an Englishman, was 'that he never doubts. That is what the system does for him.'[18]

From 1902 Strutt visited the Alps regularly, in summer and winter. His usual base was St Moritz: fashionable, expensive and frequented by royalty. It was here that he became acquainted with the Austro-Hungarian imperial family, to whom he would later render loyal service. Amongst Swiss mountain resorts, St Moritz had led the way in developing winter sports to

15. Field-Marshal, Lord Methuen (1845-1932) was elected to the AC in 1870 and made honorary member in 1927.
16. E Strutt, 'Field-Marshal Lord Methuen', *Alpine Journal*, vol 45, p146.
17. A Bonacossa, 'Reminiscences', *Alpine Journal*, vol 70, p219.
18. G Dickinson, quoted in J Morris, *Farewell the Trumpets*, London, Penguin, 1979, p306.

Strutt was 'a typical English gentleman,' according to Count Aldo Bonacossa. And 'the virtue' of such an Englishman, was 'that he never doubts. That is what the system does for him.'

amuse its visitors: skating, tobogganing – the Cresta run opened in 1884 – bobsleighing[19] and skiing. During the winter of 1897-8, a friend had sent Strutt a pair of Norwegian skis to try, 'only the second appearance of these weapons at St Moritz, the first having been worn by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.'[20] Strutt was unimpressed, concluding their role was limited to facilitating the approach to a climb. He certainly had no time for the later development of downhill racing, which he condemned as 'pot-hunting'. He objected to the introduction of a vulgar spirit of competition in the mountains and one senses he deprecated the loss of exclusivity resulting from the package tours of Cook and Lunn[21], which accompanied the popularization of skiing. Strutt climbed extensively in the Bregaglia and Bernina. He described many of these expeditions in an article published in the *Alpine Journal* of 1910, which already shows glimpses of a querulous temperament, quick to criticize: bad roads, rapacious innkeepers, a guide dropping an ice axe, an antipathy to Germans in contrast to the charming Austrians, a keen interest in Alpine history and topography and a concern for its accuracy, traits that would find fuller expression in later articles and as editor of the *Alpine Journal*.

St Moritz also provided the back-drop to his courtship of Frances Holland whom he married in October 1905. Strutt recalled his wedding day in a letter to Charles Meade[22] who was to be married imminently, and offered some advice:

> *… the great thing to do is to have just the right amount of drink at lunch. Not too much as you begin to yawn and sweat – as did a fellow I was best man to! Not too little because you feel (and look) frightened. I lunched with three other fellows and drank: ½ bottle of champagne (I <u>never</u> touch it), two glasses of port (never take it at lunch) and one large old brandy. I was at all events sober … and did not break down and weep bitterly. <u>Don't</u> buy a new hat, your best man carries it and if the inside is dirty, people blame the said best man*

19. '[T]hat most futile of *all* sports,' remarked Strutt bitterly, following an accident. *Alpine Journal*, vol 25, p5.
20. E Strutt, 'Between the Inn and the Adda', *Alpine Journal*, vol 25, p5.
21. Sir Arnold Lunn (1888-1974) was blackballed from membership of the AC because of his association with his father's travel company. Yet, according to Lunn, it was Strutt who, during his presidency, encouraged him to re-apply, hinting that he was not above rigging the ballot.
22. C F Meade (1881-1975). In 1913, on his third attempt to climb Kamet (7756m) in the Garhwal, he reached the col at 7,100m that now bears his name. He was vice-president of the Club 1934-5.

Emperor Charles and his wife Zita, whom Strutt was sent to Austria to protect in 1919. Zita remained grateful to Strutt for the rest of her life. He was captivated by her. 'Determination was written in the lines of her square little chin, intelligence in the vivacious brown eyes, intellect in the broad forehead half hidden by masses of dark hair.' A freelance effort to return Charles to power earned Strutt a mild rebuke from Lord Curzon and resigned his commission.

for his disgusting turn-out. See your boots [hotel servant] does not forget to black the soles of your boots, otherwise 'price 12/6' is visible and is not appreciated on the bride's side of the church.[23]

An example of his sense of humour, perhaps, although more likely he was being serious.

On 28 June 1914, Strutt was, as usual, in the Engadine, climbing with his favourite guide Josef Pollinger. That day, in Sarajevo, Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria and his wife Sophie, in whose company Strutt had been photographed at St Moritz a few years before, were assassinated. War followed. On 14 October, 40-year-old Captain Strutt was in France with the British Expeditionary Force and found himself in temporary command[24] of the 2nd Battalion Royal Scots, then in action in the vicinity of Neuve Chapelle. On leaving his trench to report to his divisional commander, he was blown up by a 'bouquet of six shells', which burst low in quick succession. Thrown several yards, Strutt was wounded and temporarily paralysed. Six months later he returned to active duty on the staff and in October 1916 was ordered to Gen George Milne's headquarters in Salonika to act as principal liaison officer with the French commander of the allied forces in the Balkans, Gen Maurice Sarrail. This was no easy task. Disagreements about strategy between London and Paris led inevitably to tension between the respective headquarters. Sarrail was 'a political general down to his

23. E Strutt, letter to C F Meade 19 September 1913.
24. By the end of the day, the only officers fit for duty were subalterns, the battalion having lost nine commanding officers, killed or wounded, in three days.


Strutt married Frances Holland in 1905. She captioned these photos of the happy couple as 'Bill trying to back out,' and 'Bill quite beaten.'

infantryman's boots'[25] and his radical politics and anti-Catholic sentiment would have been repugnant to Strutt who, opinionated and habitually outspoken, must have had to cultivate reserves of tact and diplomacy to maintain smooth relations. That, improbably, he did so, and to the satisfaction of his superiors, is illustrated by four mentions in dispatches, the award of the DSO and numerous foreign decorations, including the *Légion d'honneur*.

Defeat in 1918 led to political upheaval in Germany and Austria. The kaiser immediately went into exile in Holland. In Vienna the imperial government gave way to a republic but the Hapsburg emperor Karl, or Charles[26] remained in Austria, powerless and isolated at Eckartsau, a royal shooting-lodge, and under increasing pressure to abdicate or accept exile. Concerns for his safety and that of his family reached George V. Fearing they might suffer the fate of the Russian imperial family, for which he reproached himself, the king required something be done, and on 22 February 1919, Strutt, who was staying at the luxurious Hotel Danieli in Venice, received new orders: 'You will proceed at once to Eckartsau and give Emperor and Empress moral support of British Government. They are stated to be in danger of their lives, to be suffering great hardships and to lack medical attendance. Endeavour by every possible means to ameliorate their condition.'[27]

Commenting on these orders, Strutt wrote in his diary: 'We all concluded that the Emperor must mean the Emperor of Austria but disagreed as to interpretation of "moral support". None of us had any idea where Eckartsau was.'[28] Next day, the British military mission to secure the safety of the imperial family – Lt Col Strutt and his batman – set out for Vienna and arrived three days later having left in its wake a host of grovelling petty officials:

25. A Palmer, *The Gardeners of Salonika*, London, Simon & Schuster, 1965, p30.
26. Emperor Charles I (1887-1922) had become heir to the imperial crown following the assassination of his uncle, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, and succeeded Emperor Franz Josef I in 1916.
27. G Brook-Shepherd, *The Last Habsburg*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1968, p229.
28. E Strutt, quoted in G Brook-Shepherd, *op cit*, p230.

Guard asks us for tickets but quails at my retort and retires backwards murmuring the inevitable 'Küss die Hand, Excellenz…' At Graz a prolonged halt is made and everyone has to descend and be searched. We naturally refuse to dismount and the officials retire bowing.[29]

A haughty demeanour, bluster and bluff would characterise his dealings with Austrian officialdom at every level, from railway guard to chancellor. On meeting the emperor and empress, Strutt recorded his acutely observed first impressions in his diary. The 31-year-old emperor was 'an eminently loveable if weak man, by no means a fool, and ready to face his end as bravely as his ancestress, Marie Antoinette. It was impossible to avoid liking him.' The Empress Zita captivated him. 'About medium height with a slim figure she looked younger than her age, twenty-six. The first impression I had was one of extraordinary strength of character softened by her own remarkable charm. Determination was written in the lines of her square little chin, intelligence in the vivacious brown eyes, intellect in the broad forehead half hidden by masses of dark hair. Without extraordinary claims to beauty, the Empress would always attract attention in a crowd.'[30] During the next few weeks Strutt's sympathy for their cause[31], his practical help in improving supplies and his commitment to their safety – he slept with his revolver beneath his pillow – gained the trust of the imperial couple.

On 17 March, Strutt received a telegram from the War Office advising him to get the emperor out of Austria and into Switzerland at once, adding ominously that the British government could not guarantee the journey. In other words, Strutt was on his own. Strutt offered the emperor his spare uniform and Glengarry bonnet as a disguise but the emperor refused to slink across the border so Strutt determined on a more brazen tactic. He ordered that the imperial train be reassembled in all its splendour and positioned just a few miles from Eckartsau. These preparations inevitably attracted the attention of the Austrian government, which saw an opportunity to exchange an unhindered passage for the emperor's abdication. Strutt, who had promised Charles that he would leave as emperor, went to see Chancellor Renner. Taken aback by Strutt's bawling in his 'best Boche style' and threatened with a draft telegram in which, without any authority, Strutt advised blockading Austria – an enormous bluff – the chancellor caved in and the emperor travelled to Switzerland without interference. Strutt's parting from the imperial couple was 'like a dream'. He could remember little of what was said except the empress' last words: 'Only an Englishman could have accomplished what you have done for us.'[32] Strutt knelt and kissed her hand.

29. Idem.
30. Ibid p232.
31. His heart got the better of his head. To the British military attaché in Vienna he declared, absurdly: 'the only thing for England to do was to occupy Austria and Hungary in force and to rule both through the person of the Emperor.' T Montgomery-Cuninghame , ibid, p231.
32. Ibid, p246. Her gratitude was long lasting. On the occasion of the AC's centenary dinner in 1957, Empress Zita sent a message of congratulations, adding, 'my thoughts and my prayers go towards your former President, gallant Colonel Strutt, whose magnificent support to my family and myself I shall always remember.' *Alpine Journal*, vol 63, p73.

But this was not to be the end of his involvement in the emperor's affairs.

The emperor did not abandon hope of a restoration and two years later, in February 1921, was determined to return to Hungary and reclaim the crown. He sent a secret summons to Strutt who travelled from St Moritz to the emperor's villa on the shore of Lake Geneva. Charles I planned to enter Austria secretly and asked him to reconnoitre a route across the frontier that would avoid the need for a passport. Strutt duly embarked on an escapade worthy of an episode from John Buchan's *John MacNab*, in which three wealthy English gentlemen relieve their ennui in a daring enterprise for a wager. 'With a "letter from a friend" in my pocket betting me 5000frs that I could not cross the frontier without showing my passport,' Strutt climbed steep rocks above the left bank of the river Inn by night to enter Austria and return without detection, but the 'journey was most unpleasant in the dark and suited only for a practised mountaineer.'[33]

News of Strutt's freelancing on behalf of the emperor reached the foreign secretary, Lord Curzon, who 'was doubtful of the propriety', which is to say convinced of the impropriety, 'of a British subject … on the Special Reserve of officers, continuing to associate … with an ex-enemy sovereign and discussing with him political plans which must gravely affect the interests of this country.'[34] Strutt escaped severe censure but, in his own words, he 'compulsorily joined the great majority of unemployables,'[35] code perhaps for a prudent resignation of his commission.

In 1922 Strutt went to Everest as Bruce's second-in-command but, now aged 48, his heart may not have been in it. Everest expeditions strip bare a man's character. His querulous nature emerged unfettered, as George Mallory described:

> *A usual and by now a welcome sound in each new place is Strutt's voice cursing Tibet – this march for being more dreary and repulsive than even the one before, and this village for being more filthy than any other. Not that Strutt is precisely a grouser; but he likes to ease his feelings with maledictions and, I hope feels better for it.*[36]

The expedition's transport officer, Capt John Morris, thought Strutt the greatest snob he had ever met and as an officer in the Indian army of the Raj, he had encountered a few. Strutt took against George Finch – 'I always knew the fellow was a shit'[37] – but, for all his execrations, there was no malice in Strutt, who later would draft and second Finch's application for membership of the Alpine Club. On the mountain, Strutt skilfully fulfilled his brief to locate the sites of the intermediary camps up the east Rongbuk glacier, dragged himself up to camp four on the North Col, and was on hand at camp three

33. Ibid p260.
34. G Curzon, quoted in G Brook-Shepherd, *op cit*, p261.
35. E Strutt, 'Post-war Frivolities: Graians and Ortler', *Alpine Journal* vol 37, p18.
36. G Mallory, quoted in D Robertson, *George Mallory*, London, Orchid Press, 1999, p185.
37. The unconventional Finch polarised opinion and Strutt's view was not unique. Quoted in J Morris, *Hired to Kill*, London, Hart-Davis, 1960, p145.

to provide succour to the exhausted and frost-bitten party returning from the first bid for the summit. Edward Norton, whose diaries are notable for the paucity of comment on his companions, singled out Strutt for his kindness. But when an early opportunity to return home arose, Strutt took it and according to Longstaff the expedition was not sorry to see him go.

Strutt assumed the editorship of the *Alpine Journal* in 1927 and over the following ten years members of the Club accustomed themselves to his imperious manner, 'his long, hissing in-drawings of breath after he had removed a cigarette in a Dunhill holder from his lips, before laying down the Law as He saw It.'[38] His editorial commentary is a litany of attacks on the use of crampons and pitons, guideless climbing, competition and nationalism, and, importantly, the resultant acceptance of 'unjustifiable' risk. It was these outpourings that won him his reputation as an inveterate reactionary, especially amongst the younger members.

His strictures may simply have been the product of a lack of imagination and a choleric temperament but, though unsympathetic to the quasi-mystical views of Geoffrey Young and Frank Smythe – 'psychological bilge'[39] – he saw in mountaineering a nobility that was being tarnished by competition, and believed that no man's death in pursuit of a pastime was justified. And who would gainsay that? Indeed, although as editor of the *Journal* his voice was often prominent, it was not a lone voice: he spoke for many in the Club.

'In the *Alpine Journal* that I now relinquish[40] I have said hard things at times of better men, of better mountaineers, than myself … I can but say that it was 'all zeal' – zeal for the future of True Mountaineering, zeal for the old traditions of Journal and Club.' He added: 'Let this be my apology – if such be needed.'[41]

Acknowledgement
I am grateful to Jasper Meade for permission to reproduce the extract from Strutt's letter to C F Meade.

38. D Busk, 'The Young Shavers', *Mountain* 54, p40.
39. E Strutt, postcard to T Graham Brown, 26 October 1935, National Library of Scotland, acc 4338/5.
40. Worn out, he wrote, privately: 'it is the continuous grind … letter after letter begging people to send their papers in – all in vain – that has killed me!' Letter to T Graham Brown 11 October 1937; National Library of Scotland acc 4338/7.
41. E Strutt, 'Valedictory Address', *Alpine Journal*, vol 50, p11.