

MR ALBERT SMITH'S ASCENT OF MONT BLANC

Darren Bevin

So many travellers have been going up Mont Blanc lately, both in fiction and in fact, that I have recently heard of a Company to employ Sir Joseph Paxton to take it down. Only one of those travellers, however, has been enabled to bring Mont Blanc to Piccadilly, and, by his own ability and good humour, to thaw its eternal ice and snow, so that the most timid ladies may ascend it twice a day 'during the holidays' without the smallest danger or fatigue.¹

CHARLES DICKENS MADE THIS PROCLAMATION in December 1854 at an annual dinner to mark the foundation of the Commercial Travellers' Schools. He was referring to the journalist and showman Albert Smith (1816–60), a guest of honour and an artistic collaborator. A decade earlier, Smith had adapted Dickens's Christmas stories *The Cricket on the Hearth* and *The Battle of Life* for the stage. At this dinner, however, Dickens was championing Smith's most successful production: *Mr Albert Smith's Ascent of Mont Blanc*, a show that would be performed 2,000 times between 1852 and 1858 (including a command performance in front of Queen Victoria), earning him the then vast sum of £30,000. These shows began a year after the Great Exhibition (designed by the aforementioned Paxton) and capitalised on the festive and triumphant mood of a nation that turned its attention to the natural world with a desire to conquer its most difficult terrain.²

Following a lifelong fascination with Mont Blanc through stories, accounts and pictures, Smith finally climbed the mountain in August 1851. The entourage consisted of his three companions, sixteen guides and eighteen porters, who carried the copious amounts of food and drink for the two-day expedition. Smith managed to reach the summit and returned safely to Chamonix to great fanfare. On 15 March 1852 the resulting account of the expedition, *Mr Albert Smith's Ascent of Mont Blanc*, opened at the Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly. It was an immediate success. In dramatic detail, the show charted Smith's climb:

The view is superb, but you dare not look at it. It is only when the loose ground crumbles away beneath your right foot, and you nearly slide away over the precipice, [...] that you give up staring about you and do nothing but carefully watch the footsteps of the man who is going on before.³

It was descriptions like this that enthralled Smith's audiences. His own climb of Mont Blanc had been undoubtedly arduous and perilous, exacerbated by his lack of preparation and fitness; he literally had to be dragged to the summit by his guides. However, he relentlessly exaggerated the dangers to maximise the sensations he desired to evoke from his audiences.

To accompany Smith's personal account, dioramas were shown charting the ascent, based on sketches by the artist William Beverley (c.1810–89). Since the late eighteenth century the Alps had been a popular visual source of inspiration recreated in paintings and panoramas, and later in dioramas, magazines, travel guidebooks and

photographs, inspired in part by the newly founded interest in the mountain aesthetic by both Romantic writers and scientists. However, much of this visual reproduction captured the Alps both from afar and from below, with the spectator as a distant observer. Beverley's dioramas, inspired and influenced by Smith's interpretation of his climb, brought a sense of intimacy and interaction in which the audience could experience the sensation of following Smith's ascent.

The Alps were slowly becoming more accessible to a broader class of people with the expansion of the railway from the 1850s onwards. However, during the popularity of Smith's *Mont Blanc* shows, they still remained a sight that few could actually see and far fewer could attempt to scale. The *Era* wrote about how Smith's show revealed places 'that cannot be visited, even in these railway days, without a considerable outlay of time, convenience and money'.⁴ The dioramas used for the *Mont Blanc* shows therefore provided the opportunity to experience grand, seemingly three-dimensional scenes from high on the mountain, whilst lighting effects gave the illusion of time passing and changes in the weather. The spectator was immersed in an inhospitable, cold, foreign climate far away from the London streets and the increasing urbanising effects of the Industrial Revolution. The *Daily News* wrote that Beverley's dioramas gave 'great assistance to the fancy of the spectator; and we can almost feel as if we had accompanied the bold adventurers in their perilous journey'.⁵

When describing the evening camped out on Mont Blanc before the assault on the summit the next day, Smith emphasised a myriad of colours as the sun set behind the mountains:

As the twilight gradually crept over the lower world, the glow became still more vivid; and presently, as the blue mists rose in the valleys, the tops of the higher mountains looked like islands rising from a filmy ocean – an archipelago of gold. By degrees, this metallic lustre was softened into tints – first orange, and then bright, transparent crimson, along the horizon, rising through the different hues, with prismatic regularity, until, immediately above us, the sky was a deep blue, merging towards the east into glowing violet.⁶

On cue, the diorama would be lit accordingly to synchronise with the narrative, contrasting significantly with the same scene that appeared in black and white in the *Illustrated London News* (Fig. 1).

Beverley had a long-standing working partnership with Smith and had provided the scenic ornamentation for shows at the London Lyceum, including Smith's productions of *Whittington and his Cat* and *Cinderella*. Of more significance were Beverley's depictions of scenes from Egypt and the Nile that provided the dioramas for Smith's *The Overland Mail* (1850–1), which described his journey through the Middle East. Raymund Fitzsimons comments that this show

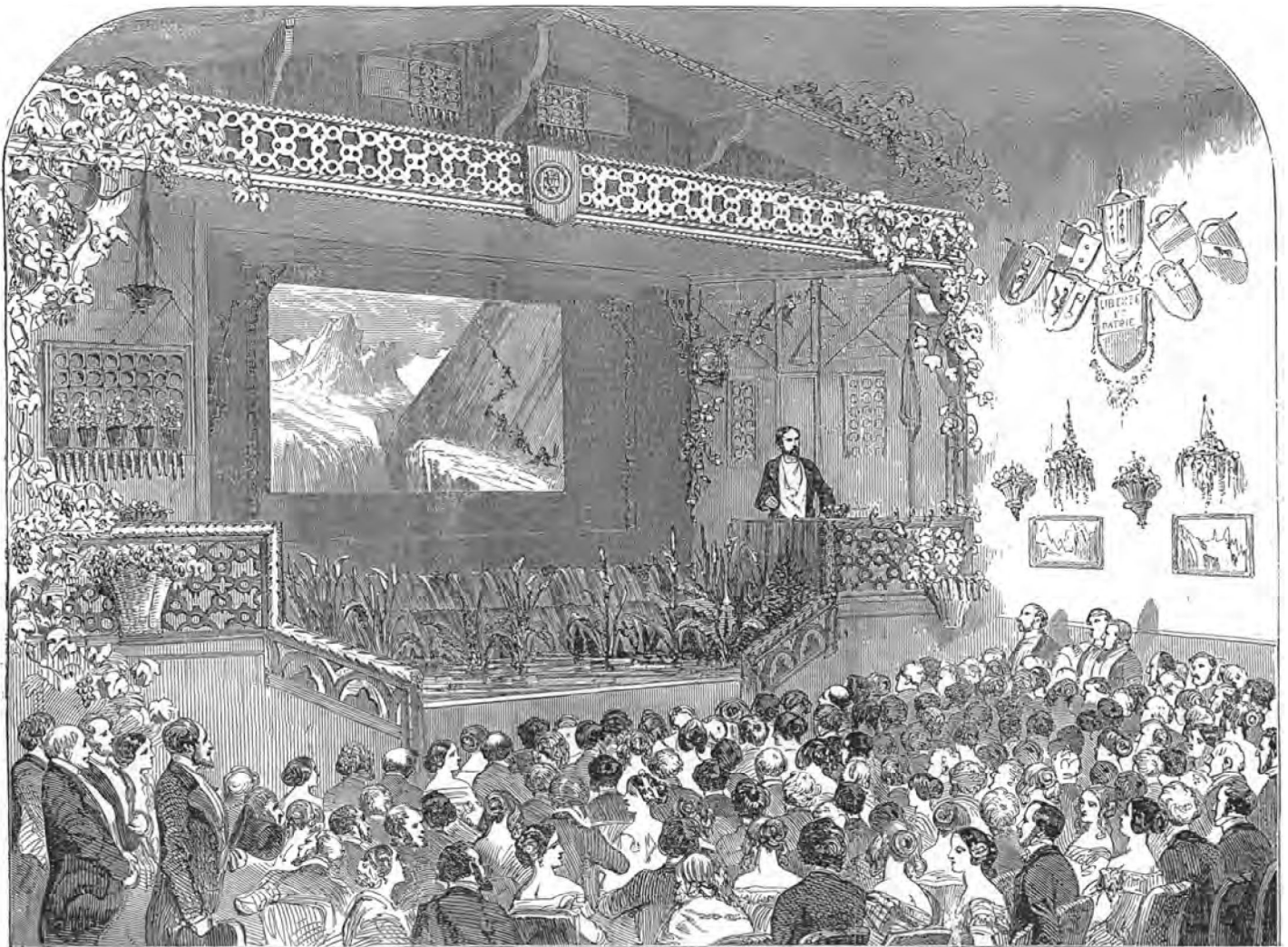
artfully compounded two distinct classes of entertainment – the instructive diorama and the comic one-man show –



1. William Beverley, 'Mr Albert Smith's ascent of Mont Blanc – the Grand Mulets', from *Illustrated London News* 10 April 1852

NOTES

1. Charles Dickens, *The speeches of Charles Dickens*, ed. R.H. Shepherd (London: Michael Joseph, n.d.), 166.
2. For an excellent short account of Smith's career and shows, see Mike Simkin, 'Albert Smith: entrepreneur and showman', *Living Pictures: the journal of the popular and projected image before 1914* Vol. 1 No. 1 (2001), 18–28.
3. Albert Smith, *The story of Mont Blanc* (London: Ward, Lock & Tyler, 1860), 214–5.
4. 'Mr Albert Smith's Ascent of Mont Blanc', *The Era* 21 March 1852, 10.
5. 'Mr Albert Smith's Ascent of Mont Blanc', *Daily News* 30 November 1852, 5.
6. 'Mr Albert Smith's Ascent of Mont Blanc', *Illustrated London News* 10 April 1852, 291. This article included a transcript of Smith's narrative from his show.
7. Raymund Fitzsimons, *The Baron of Piccadilly: the travels and entertainments of Albert Smith 1816–1860* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1967), 97.



2. 'Mr Albert Smith's Ascent of Mont Blanc at the Egyptian Hall, Piccadilly', from Illustrated London News 25 December 1852

and the resulting *mélange* was so popular with his audience that he used the same formula for his other entertainments including the *Mont Blanc* shows.⁷ The 'instructive' element is significant. The popularity of panoramas and dioramas lay in their ability to replicate a landscape or scene from history that audiences could believe exactly matched the reality, had they been there to observe it. The spectator could therefore believe he or she was seeing something of informative value. This was heightened if the paintings were of a foreign environment and culture.

In *The Overland Mail*, the dioramas had portrayed different landscapes one by one. Though lighting was used to depict time passing, the paintings were fixed. *The Times* reported that:

*His skies are remarkable for transparency, his distances are always conceived with a true feeling for atmosphere, and the figures in his foregrounds are admirably brought out. A picture of the Nile, with a 'kandjia' or native boat, upon it, is a perfect specimen of scenic art. The views are separate from each other, not connected as in other moving dioramas, and hence we would suggest that in future exhibitions the curtain should be lowered between each scene and that a song should occur in the interval.*⁸

In the *Mont Blanc* shows however the canvas rolled vertically from top to bottom of the screen portraying the climbers making their ascent and allowing the audience to become more involved in the climb especially when accompanied by Smith's detailed and graphic commentary.

Beverley did not accompany Smith on his climb of Mont Blanc, and the dioramas that were produced were subject to the same exaggeration as the narrative. Another engraving from the *Illustrated London News* (Fig. 2) shows Smith lecturing on the Mont Blanc ascent with a diorama of his party traversing the Mur de la Côte, described by Smith as:

*[...] an all but perpendicular iceberg. At one point you can reach it from the snow, but immediately after you begin to ascend it obliquely, there is nothing below but a chasm in the ice more frightful than anything yet passed. Should the foot slip, or the baton give way, there is no chance for life – you would glide like lightning from one frozen crag to another, and finally be dashed to pieces, hundreds and hundreds of feet below in the horrible depths of the glacier.*⁹

Both the diorama and the narrative are very much based on Smith's own perception of the climb, and mountaineers in the next decade, during the 'Golden Age of Mountaineering', criticised the show as exaggerated and sensationalist. The Alpine explorer Douglas Freshfield, who attended Smith's show, wrote 'I recollect particularly an absurd picture of the Mur de la Côte. I was very much disappointed ten years later by the reality!'¹⁰ However, few could question their interpretation as the Alpine heights were unknown territory to the vast majority, leading to remarks such as those made by Edmund Yates in his memoir of Albert Smith on how 'the magic hand of Beverly [sic] so accurately displayed the wonders of the ice-world'.¹¹

From the beginning of the first season of shows, Smith unashamedly associated himself with Mont Blanc and established himself as the authority figure on the subject. As *The Times* reported, 'no Londoner can think of its snow-capped summit without seeing our adventurous author serenely seated on its loftiest apex'.¹² By appropriating and branding the mountain for himself, the two became synonymous in London during the 1850s. He had learnt the significance of self-promotion through a meeting a decade earlier with Phineas T. Barnum, who was touring Europe with 'General Tom Thumb'.¹³ Smith ensured that his own name appeared prominently on all promotion, sometimes overshadowing the subject itself.

To retain the interest of the public and ensure the shows remained

8. 'Mr Albert Smith's Entertainment', *The Times* 29 May 1850, 5.

9. Albert Smith, *The story of Mont Blanc*, 260–1.

10. J. Monroe Thorington, *Mont Blanc sideshow: the life and times of Albert Smith* (Philadelphia: John C. Winston, 1934), 153.

11. Albert Smith, *The story of Mont Blanc*, viii.

12. 'The Ascent of Mont Blanc', *The Times* 30 November 1852, 8.

13. See Raymund Fitzsimons, *Barnum in London* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1969).

a success, Smith travelled to the Alps between each season of shows for new ideas and to purchase exhibits. He would travel through new towns and cities in Europe that would be included in future shows, accompanied by Beverley who would produce fresh dioramas. For example, at the end of the third season in 1854, Beverley travelled with Smith to Chamonix via a different route, through Holland and Germany instead of France. The second page of the programme for the fourth season emphasised these changes:

The route to Switzerland conducts the visitor from London to Rotterdam by Brussels, and thence through Holland and up the Rhine. The new views, painted by Mr William Beverley, are Amsterdam, on the Rokin Canal, looking towards the Site of the Old Bourse; the village of Broek; the high street of Berne, with the clock tower; the pass of the Gemmi; the Hut lately erected on the Grands Mulets; Lyons; and the place de la Concorde, Paris. In addition to these, a panorama of the Rhine, by M. Groppius, of Berlin, accompanies that portion of the Lecture, including Rotterdam and the chief objects of interest between Cologne and Bingen.¹⁴

New dioramas also reflected changes in the landscape, attributed in part to the impact of tourism and mountaineering, including, as described above, the construction of a refuge on the slopes of Mont Blanc to provide shelter on the mountain. Smith attended the opening of this hut in the summer of 1853. During the six years of the show, new dioramas of Chamonix had to be created following a large flood in September 1852 and then a fire in the summer of 1855 that destroyed much of the town. When the revamped season of shows was about to commence, Smith would re-advertise them highlighting the new content, whilst ensuring that the opening night was attended by celebrity climbers who would generate welcome publicity.

It was not long before the interior of the Egyptian Hall was dressed to resemble a Swiss village. The façade of a two-storey Swiss chalet of actual size was constructed, which was raised when the dioramas were shown and lowered again during the intervals. In addition to a small waterfall fringed with Alpine plants, the windows of a chalet formed a private box at the side of the stage. As a youth, the novelist Henry James saw Smith's show and later reminisced about sitting 'in a sort of rustic balcony or verandah simulating the outer gallery of a Swiss cottage framed in creepers'.¹⁵ Keen to exploit the popularity of the show, Smith realised early on the potential of merchandising by selling gifts and souvenirs. By the second season there was a souvenir shop selling sledges and alpenstocks. Sheet music to the newly composed *Mont Blanc Quadrille* and *The Chamouni Polka*, written especially for the show, could be purchased.¹⁶ To capitalise on the Christmas period, seventeen stereoscopic views of his ascent of Mont Blanc designed for children could be bought.

Mont Blanc was the most popular London show of the decade. Unsurprisingly, this resulted in similar extravaganzas created for the London stage, as Smith's shows 'sent waves of inspiration into the London entertainment business'.¹⁷ Others tried to match the appeal and success by using the panorama and/or diorama as a backdrop to an entertainment of humour and song and, as today, popular success also provoked parody and spin-off. The dramatist James Robinson Planché created *Mr Buckstone's ascent of Mount Parnassus: a panoramic extravaganza*. In one scene, the comedian

Buckstone performed a sketch of Smith's show in front of a backdrop depicting the Egyptian Hall chalet as an acknowledgement of his inspiration.¹⁸

As the seasons of shows continued, the public become more familiar with the terrain, not only through Smith but through increasing numbers of others climbing the mountain and giving their own account. In 1856 *The Times* complained that 'at present a perfect Mont Blanc mania pervades the minds of our fellow-countrymen', and requested that no more climbing narratives be sent to the paper.¹⁹ Indeed Mont Blanc was now perceived as a trouble-free climb, provided one took appropriate precautions. Punch satirised this ease, suggesting that Smith intended 'to make another ascent, for the purpose of indicating the best place for lampposts, the government having determined to light Mont Blanc with gas, to the very top'.²⁰ Consequently interest was being generated elsewhere, with Alfred Wills's climb of the Wetterhorn in 1854 beginning the 'Golden Age of Mountaineering'.

In 1856 Smith discontinued the narrative of his ascent. Beverley's dioramas of the Mont Blanc expedition were shown unaccompanied during the interval. That year Smith travelled to Chamonix via Genoa, Naples, Pompeii, Capri and then up to the summit of Vesuvius, as his realisation that the audience needed new stimuli took him to the edges of Europe and beyond. However, the shows

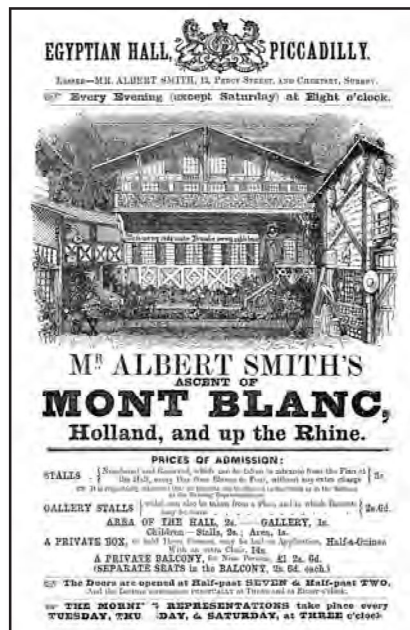
lacked the excitement, thrill and committed personal association that had made the original show such a success. By the time of his entirely new show *To China and back* (1858–60), the style and content had become somewhat old-fashioned.

Smith's health was also in decline during the *China* shows. A few days before Christmas 1859 he suffered a stroke which invalidated him for a fortnight, although he returned to the stage the following month. On 12 May 1860 he caught bronchitis. Although at first he continued with the entertainment minus the songs, he finally cancelled the show on 21 May and died two days later.

Three years earlier, in 1857, the Alpine Club had been established and Smith accepted the invitation to become one of the founding members. Despite the disapproval of some members of his treatment of the Alps, he was the first member to have climbed Mont Blanc and was elected under an initial rule that 'a candidate shall not be eligible unless he shall have ascended to the top of a

mountain 13,000 feet in height'.²¹ However, there is very little reference to him in *Peaks, Passes and Glaciers*, the journal set up by the club in 1858, which subsequently became the *Alpine Journal* in 1863. Many original members of the Club saw him as predominantly a commercial showman with little interest for the Alps themselves. His shows, they thought, were vulgar representations of Mont Blanc. Nevertheless, at the height of the shows' popularity, as Dickens pointed out, they gave an escapist, magical and fearful (if perhaps inaccurate) portrayal of an exotic landscape during a period before photography and mountaineers gave a more candid interpretation of the landscape. This encouraged some to seek out unexplored wilderness and allowed others an escapist glimpse into unfamiliar territory that was rapidly turning into a very marketable commodity and 'the playground of Europe'.

DARREN BEVIN has recently conducted research at the University of Exeter on Albert Smith and John Ruskin, and their association with the transformation of the Alps in the mid nineteenth century. He previously lived and worked in Brig, Switzerland.



3. Programme of 'Mr Albert Smith's Ascent of Mont Blanc' (Bill Douglas Centre, University of Exeter)

14. A copy of this programme is in the collection of the Bill Douglas Centre, University of Exeter.

15. Henry James, *Henry James' autobiography*, ed. Frederick W. Dupee (London: W.H. Allen, 1956), 179.

16. For more on Smith's inventive merchandising, see Simkin, *op. cit.*

17. Richard D. Altick, *The shows of London* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), 476.

18. Altick, 476.

19. 'Mont Blanc has become a positive nuisance', *The Times* 6 October 1856, 8.

20. 'Good news for Cockney travellers', *Punch* 16 September 1854, 110.

21. George Band, *Summit: 150 years of the Alpine Club* (London: Collins, 2006), 14.