

MOUNTAIN PIONEERS WITH SKETCHBOOKS

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*Art does not reproduce the visible
– rather it makes visible*

Paul Klee

In literature the mountain has been a symbol of Norway and the national. In 1814 the Eidsvoll men promised to be “unified and true till Dovre falls.” During the summer of 1822 Johannes Flintoe went over the mountain from Sogn and painted “Sæterliv under Skakastølstindene” [“Mountain-dairying life under the Skakastøl Peaks”]. But here the mountains are painted as a scene in the background, while the folk-life of the seter meadow, the field near the mountain-dairying compound, receives central attention. The Enlightenment carried with it a kind of mountain terror. Henrik Wergeland traveled across Sognefjell in 1832 and saw it as heaven-defying and immovable. He spoke of nature as a desert and casket. At the sight of the Skagastøl Peaks he declared: “Ha, a Throne of Terror and Death! Black peaks three.”

Long after Rousseau had launched his romanticist views of a return to nature, national romanticism stood at the door, including in Norway. The sport movement arose after 1850, and at that point the climbers came on stage. They brought a new focus on achievements, expeditions and polar explorations. When Nansen walked alone on skis from Bergen to Oslo it obviously wasn't to look at the view.

Seeking challenges is an impulse lodged deeply in human beings — the desire to stretch oneself ever farther, the dream of reaching ever higher. A spirit of daring drove the mountain pioneers toward a rediscovery of Norway as a mountain land and the creation of a “National Identity.” They climbed, drew, painted and wrote – and became poets walking in the forefront, innovating, showing the way. Their art and written accounts have opened visions, inspired and awakened dreams among the many that did follow in their tracks.

We have chosen five people who succeeded in placing their vision of the mountains on canvas, and who simultaneously left trails as pioneers in the Norwegian high country.

SCIENCE AND ADVENTURE

In the summer of 1820 two Christiania students, Christian Peter Bianco Boeck and Baltazar Mathias Keilhau (1797-1858), reached the top of Falketind. It was the first conquering of an alpine summit in Norway, and later commentary has continued to describe it as a daring climb. Research interests motivated the two climbers, but they were also adventurers. With youthful audacity they sought the new and unknown. This happened more than a half century before well-to-do Englishmen and Danes led onward the conquest of Jotunheimen's peaks.

The first climbing of Falke Peak opened a new mountain tract previously known only to reindeer hunters,

fishermen and cattlemen; however, “the concerns of the scientist in this region were very far from clear.” “It sounds rather unbelievable, but it is nonetheless true: There could still be found, as one wrote in the Year of Our Lord 1820, in the southern Norwegian mountains, but a few Miles' Distance [the Norwegian Mile equalling ten kilometers or six English miles] from the Ocean and from the great Communication-connections with the western and northern Norwegian mountains, a region of land 100-150 Square Miles' extent, of which the civilized World had little more Knowledge than of, for example, New Holland or Patagonia and inner Africa, which is to say the World's least-known areas.” Government officials and the citizenry learned via the Keilhau article and sketches about this heretofore “unknown” mountain region. Important discoveries are often rediscoveries: seeing things with new eyes, playing the role of an intermediary sharing the new knowledge with others.

This discovery was described in Budstikken [The Messenger] in 1820. The article “Nogle Efterretninger om et hidtil ukjent Stykke af det søndefjelske Norge” [“News of a previously unknown Area of the southern Norwegian mountains”] attracted considerable attention. There Keilhau proposed to give the mountain region the name Jotunfjeldene [the Mountains of the Giants]. Later it was changed to Jotunheimen [the Home of the Giants] by Aasmund Olavsson Vinje.

Keilhau, the son of a pastor, was an academic who later became a professor of geology. He wrote most of the account of the trip “Jotunheimens oppdagelse i 1820” [“Jotunheimen's Discovery in 1820”]. During that trip he also documented all he saw. He drew the mountain territory as well as circumstances allowed, and he sketched maps of the undiscovered regions. He gathered his pictures in a portfolio of water-colors he later published with a dedication to his traveler-friend Boeck.

Keilhau made just one later trip back to Jotunheimen. He attempted a climb of Galdhøpiggen, the highest mountain of Norway, but had to turn around near the top because of bad weather. The place was given the name Keilhau's Summit.

THE STRUGGLE OVER SKAGASTØL PEAK

Emanuel Mohn (1842-1891) was a genuine outdoor-enthusiast, writer, illustrator and romanticist. He came from Bergen's wealthier citizenry and educated himself in philology in Christiania. There he came in contact with among others Ernst Sars, Aasmund Olavsson Vinje and Hagbart Berner. Language issues (the movement for New Norwegian), the politics of the Left, nation-building and not least mountain touring brought them together. There were strenuous discussions in the Student Association restaurant every Friday. From Mohn's many trips into Jotunheimen came his numerous articles in the yearbooks of the Turistforening

[Norwegian Trekking Association], some of which were accompanied by his own illustrations. They fit perfectly with the period's national-romanticist tendencies. The style was personal, committed and marked by enormous enthusiasm. The articles received much notice and quickly led to his acquiring a reputation as Norway's foremost mountain-sportsman and first Jotunolog; or expert student of the Jotunheimen region.

Paradoxically enough it was an Englishman who would receive the title Father of Norwegian Mountaineering. After Mohn climbed the northern Dyhaug Peak in 1874, he met William Cecil Slingsby (1849-1929) on the steamship back to Bergen. They liked each other immediately. Slingsby had a wealthy father and a family of Scandinavian origin. He was in his mid-twenties, a physically strong person with intense drive to conquer the untamed.

After correspondence through two winters Mohn and Slingsby met again 8 July 1876. A long trip by cariole, a small one-horse two-wheeled open carriage, took them from the capital up to Bygdin in the Jotunheimen region, where they had arranged to meet Knut Lykken, who knew the local area deeply. He would be the guide for the summer's great campaign toward the peaks. Across five days they succeeded in five first-climbs on the way west toward Hurrungane and Store Skagastølstind, or Storen [the Hurrungs and Great Skagastøl Peak, or the Great One]. Early on the morning of July 21 they started from Vormeli deep down in Utladalen [the Uta Valley]. The day before, Mohn had been the first to reach the top of Gjertvasstind [Gjertvass Peak], but Storen [the Great One] proved too severe! After a strenuous tour over steep snowfields and up glacier walls Lykken and Mohn were completely exhausted. They remained at what later has been named Mohn's Skar [Mohn's Pass]. This ignited Slingsby. He was already an experienced climber and was willing to take the risk. He went alone up the sharp, narrow mountain ridge and reached the summit. Mohn asked afterward if Slingsby felt proud, but received the answer that Slingsby was deeply ashamed because he felt his action had been irresponsible and that such solo climbing was far too dangerous. When Den Norske Tindeklub [The Norwegian Alpine Club] was founded in 1908, Slingsby was an obvious choice for honorary membership.

In October of the same year Emanuel Mohn gave a lecture in the Norwegian Student Association on Slingsby's climbing of Store Skagastølstind. He proclaimed that his countrymen were still not ready for such mountain-climbing, that a peak such as Storen was beyond a Norwegian's reach. In the room was a listener who considered this an attack on the national honor. Landscape painter Harald Petersen (1850-1933) felt insulted as a Norwegian. Only a year later he left alone for the mountains. However, he found no one to come with him to permit a rope-team up the steep glacier to Mohn's Pass. Originally he had his sights on following Slingsby's route "stride for stride." He had to change his plan and tried his own route, but did not succeed. From Bandet he climbed daringly over the bare, smooth, sloping rocks. After he passed Hjørnet [The Corner] and Galleriene [The Galleries] he was nearly killed by a fall out against the south wall. His hat floated down the precipice, but he stopped in the midst of the fall, clinging to an outcropping of rock. As early as the next year he was back. Knut Lykken had let himself be persuaded to be the guide, and with his experience they reached Mohn's Pass. But the agreement beforehand had been clear: not one step further for the mountain farmer. Petersen climbed on alone from there and followed approximately the same route up as Slingsby. From

the stone cairn at the top he took the handkerchief of the Englishman as a trophy, and later sent it in a letter to Slingsby. Otherwise we know little about Harald Petersen as a mountain-climber. But in recognition of his feat on Storen, he was invited in 1909 to be a member of the Norsk Tindeklub [the Norwegian Alpine Club].

Mohn had had many negative reactions from his allowing a foreigner the honor of the first climb of Great Skagastøl Peak. It didn't help that Petersen had avenged the earlier defeat. Eventually Mohn ended his writing in the Travel Association's yearbook with the sentence: "With this I finish my portrayals of Jotunheimen in the Yearbook, appropriately and permanently." The criticism that he lacked courage seems to have struck him very hard, and melancholy dominated the last years of Mohn's life.

ROUGH JOYS

Peter Wessel Zapffe (1899-1990) was a philosopher, humorist and alpine climber who wrote the examination for his university law degree in verse. During his university studies in Oslo he taught himself mountain-climbing at Kolsås and became acquainted with Arne Næss. Successfully back in his native city of Tromsø, Zapffe carried out more than twenty first-climbs. He became a noted member of the Norwegian climbing community with his many literary contributions and humorous drawings.

In a 1933 discussion of mountain-climbing he said it was "a sport for single people, for originals and outsiders. A sport that relates to other sports the way champagne relates to beech-beer, and already on those grounds it's unsuitable as a folk-sport in Norway. And who can think seriously of bringing the broad masses to a place where there's barely room for a single searching soul?"

Zapffe, considered an Existentialist philosopher, took as one of his influences the philosophical pessimism of Arthur Schopenhauer. In his doctoral dissertation he formulated what would be a lifelong insight: that human beings are overdeveloped in relation to the circumstances under which they live, and fail to fit in with the natural world. Thus they have no possibility of satisfying their need for a responsible justice in existence and meaning of life. His perspective on climbing may perhaps be understood in the light of this. Arne Næss has put it this way about Zapffe's beliefs: "Climbing is as meaningless as life itself, he said, but it's an excellent distraction."

Zapffe is especially well known for his literary descriptions of climbing. In several essays and stories he speaks subtly and humorously of his escapades in nature. His essay "Stetind" first appeared in the 1937 yearbook of the Travel Association. The mountain is discussed as a giant, titan, majesty and horn of hell: "an anvil upon which the gods can hammer." In 1904 Slingsby himself had failed to become the first to climb Stetind: "The ugliest mountain I ever saw. There is nothing like it in the world." A picture was taken of the peak in 1904 that crucially prompted the Norwegian climbing trio of Schjelderup, Bryn and Rubenson to become the first to ascend Stetind 30 July 1910.

Several of Zapffe's essays are collected in the 1969 book "Barske glæder" ["Rough joys"], among them "Stetind" and an extended, previously unpublished version of "Fire Korstog til Piggstind" ["Four Crusades to Spike Peak"], selections regarded today as classics that opened the world of the mountains of North Norway. Through his writings Zapffe has united northern Norwegian humor with an authentic intellectual's clear thought and sharp pen. He himself never climbed Piggstind, in spite of his four attempts in winter to

reach the top — the first time during Christmas of 1922. In fact, the first successful winter ascent of the peak was as late as in 1971.

Zapffe, known as a lone wolf, was skeptical of anything smacking of organization. His first application for membership in the Norwegian Alpine Club was written almost as an anti-application in which he spoke ironically and deprecatingly of his climbing activities. The application was rejected, but later he thanked the club and said yes when it sent him an invitation to join.

For that matter, mountain climbing isn't a "sport" at all. It is a Dionysian affirmation of life. It is the poor creeping human's encounter with the wrathful scowl on the face of the earth. A Dante's journey along the jaws of the Inferno, a stroke of arcing life over the silence born of stone.

P. W. Zapffe

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