
The End of 'The Golden Age'

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The Eagle's Nest

A Victorian mountaineer and his summer home in the Alps

(Plates 69–71)

Sir Alfred Wills is chiefly remembered today for his ascent of the Wetterhorn in September 1854, said to have marked the start of the Golden Age of mountaineering. He was one of the original members of the Alpine Club, and at the General Meeting following his death in 1912, the President, making the announcement, said that Sir Alfred Wills's '... alpine life is part of the early history of the Club, and is to be found in the pages of *Peaks, Passes and Glaciers*, in the volumes of the *Alpine Journal*, and in those two charming alpine classics *Wanderings among the High Alps* and *The Eagle's Nest in the Valley of Sixt*.'¹

Wills was born in 1828, the son of a successful Birmingham solicitor, educated at non-conformist schools and University College, London, where he obtained the highest honours in classics, mathematics and law. He was called to the Bar in 1851, took silk in 1872, and was made a judge and knighted in 1884. The best-known trial over which he presided was that of Oscar Wilde in 1895: '... the worst case I have ever tried,' he declared in his summing-up. He was made a member of the Privy Council in 1905 and devoted his closing years to the affairs of what was to become Southampton University. His first marriage produced two children, and the second, after the death of his first wife, five more. Further details of his life may be found in an extensive obituary in the *Alpine Journal*,² and in the Alpine Club Register,³ but the facts sketched above serve to show what Ronald W Clark described as 'in many ways the laboratory specimen of the early Victorian mountaineer'⁴ – a man rising to the top of his profession, but willing to devote a couple of months every year to the mountains.

The ascent of the Wetterhorn was Wills's first major peak, his earlier summers in the Alps having been concerned only with cols and passes: his ambition to attempt higher things was the result of meeting the Chamonix guide Auguste Balmat, whom Professor Forbes had brought to England during the winter of 1853. Wills was newly married, and the visit to Grindelwald came at the end of a honeymoon which had included a night on the Mer de Glace as an introduction for his wife to the joys of the high mountains. Here, though, Lucy remained in the village, while her husband, accompanied by Balmat and three other guides and a porter, headed for the Wetterhorn.



69. Sir Alfred Wills at 'The Eagle's Nest' in the 1870s. (p207)

It was not the first ascent – the mountain had been climbed three times before, though never from the Grindelwald side – but there were two factors which distinguished this expedition: it had no scientific purpose, and there was an element of sporting competition about it. There were no porters bearing heavy theodolites or devices for measuring the depth of the snow – just an iron sheet carried by one of the guides to be planted as a ‘flagge’ on the summit. And the competition appeared in the shape of two local chamois hunters⁵ who thought they would try to save the honour of Grindelwald by beating the foreign party to the top: in the event, after threats of fisticuffs from Balmat, the parties joined forces and continued climbing together with good humour all round. The route to the summit ridge lay up a rocky arête:

At length, we came to a very singular formation. Standing out from a nearly perpendicular wall of rock were a series of thin parallel wedges of rock, planted, with the thin edge upwards, at right angles to the body of the mountain, and separated from one another by deep intervening clefts and hollows ... presenting, at the top, a rough and jagged ridge, forty or fifty feet long, by which we must pass to reach the plateau which lay just beyond ... It was nervous work; a good head, a stout heart, a steady hand and foot were needed.⁶

Those who have climbed the Wetterhorn by this route will recognise from Wills’s description, in *Wanderings among the High Alps*, first published in 1856, the upper section of the arête that bears his name, the Willsgrätli – a permanent reminder of the role of this man in encouraging Alpine adventure. Wills and his family are also remembered with affection in the Giffre valley in France, and hikers on the GR5, heading southwards towards Chamonix, may make a stop at the Refuge Alfred Wills below the Col d’Anterne, high above the family chalet.

My own interest in Wills started with finding a battered copy of his book *The Eagle’s Nest* in a pile of Victorian mountaineering literature lent by a friend. It is a highly readable book with a strong romantic appeal. The author’s descriptions of finding, in the Alps of Haute Savoie, the site for a chalet, negotiations for purchase and the role of his young wife in designing the house she was not to survive to see completed, speak to us clearly over the century-and-a-half since they were written. The book obviously had the same appeal for Wills’s contemporaries: a second edition was called for within six weeks of its first appearance. The binding is attractive, cloth with elaborate gilt foliage on the cover surrounding a medallion of an eagle with young sitting on a nest. The dedication is to Lucy, who died in 1860: ‘To the memory of a gentle, loving, and most accomplished wife ... these pages concerning scenes and plans which, however fascinating in themselves, derived their chief interest in my eyes from the hope that we should often again enjoy them together, are dedicated.’

Wills was captivated by the place the first time he saw it:

It was in the month of August 1857 that I first saw the Plateau des Fonds. I was descending from the summit of the Buet in company with Balmat and an English friend.⁷ The scenery struck us as uncommon in character and unique in beauty, and as we stood at the edge of the level ground, it passed through my mind what a glorious site it would be for a chalet. A day or two afterwards we both wished to revisit the spot, for we could neither of us call to mind in our Alpine experiences a view that had pleased us equally. Finding that our second visit did but strengthen our impressions of the rare beauty of the scenery, the passing thought of the former day returned, and began to assume the character of a definite wish.⁸

The land was owned by the commune of Sixt, and initial negotiations were promising, but when Wills returned after a week away, local opposition, led by the Curé, had hardened against him:

I found on my return to Sixt that no stone had been left unturned to get a majority in the council to take the high conservative view of the question. There would be a protestant crusade in the valley; domestic purity would suffer even more severely than religious orthodoxy; one intruder would give rise to another, and their 'montagnes' (sufficient for many times the number of cattle at present pastured upon them) would be cut up into building patches to satisfy the vagaries of English taste; then the cattle and goats would stray over the land of this English aristocrat, who would impound them and refuse to release them except upon payment of exorbitant compensation; besides, it was all nonsense about his wanting to build a place for autumn recreation; would he be likely to come a thousand miles from home for such a purpose? The fact was, he had found the vein of gold ore Jacques Balmat had failed to discover; and their forests – the pride and wealth of the valley – would be destroyed to find fuel for his smelting furnaces – or if not that, he wanted to build an hotel, or some similar abomination; and why should they be condemned to have their valley overrun by foreigners, like that of Chamouni?⁹

An extremely hostile meeting of the Sixt council followed, and at this point Wills thought the matter closed but, encouraged by a local lawyer, he pursued his request with higher authorities, ultimately to the Minister of the Interior at Turin (until 1860, Savoy belonged to Piedmont). In July 1858, the plot of land in the Vallée des Fonds was his.

Wills returned with his wife that August to a tumultuous welcome – astounding considering the hostility which had surrounded his previous

visit: a brass band played beneath their hotel balcony at Samoëns, a deputation greeted them on the road to Sixt and a salute was fired in the Gorge des Tines! Permission to set up a saw-mill and a lime-kiln was granted without the slightest opposition, and requests for timber, stone and sand met with immediate positive response. Lucy was equally enchanted by the valley, and she – sole architect for the project – and her husband marked out the position of the chalet. Wills notes that the contractor pronounced that her scale-drawings were good enough to work from, and it was agreed that work should begin in the following spring. She also wrote the following lines ‘to be carved, after the Swiss fashion, along the base of the galleries:

A wanderer I: I left my much-loved home,
O'er plain and hill, 'mid ice and snows to roam;
Through many a land my wandering feet have strayed,
Yet here, at length, content my feet have stayed.¹⁰

Wills was unable to visit Sixt in 1859, but was ‘obliged to trust implicitly, as I may safely do’, in the competence of the contractor, under the supervision of Balmat, trust in whom, as it turned out, was seriously misplaced.

The book tells us no more about the Eagle's Nest, nothing of its completion nor of the excitement of the first stay in it. Perhaps this had something to do with Lucy's death in April 1860.

In the summer of 1992 I walked up the track from Sixt to the Vallée des Fonds to discover that the chalet is, indeed, still there, in a superb position above the Giffre facing the Pointe de Salles. It has seen better times, however, and looked a little sad on a wet and misty day, windows boarded up, with a rusty corrugated iron roof replacing the original wooden shingles. Enquiry at the refuge revealed that the Wills family had sold the chalet long ago, and that it was now owned by a Mme Lucas who lived in Paris but walked up to the valley every summer in spite of being well on in years.

That might have been the end of the story as far as I was concerned, but then I discovered that a fellow AC member, Bill Norton, was a great-grandson of Sir Alfred Wills, and he was able to tell me that one of his cousins, John Wills, had been in regular contact with Mme Lucas and would give me her address in Paris. A short letter from me produced a long reply from her, with a warm welcome to visit her at the chalet the following summer. This I did, and spent a fascinating couple of hours with her. It turned out that Denise Lucas is half English and is the widow of an Englishman with whom she had a book business – which, in her eighties, she still runs – and that they had bought the chalet in 1958. The interior of the Eagle's Nest is just as interesting as the exterior; built around a grand central staircase, it is altogether on a more imposing scale than the usual Alpine chalet. My appetite for finding out more about the history of the place was whetted still further.

Right

70. 'The Eagle's Nest' as it is today.
(Trevor Braham) (p207)

Below

71. 'The Eagle's Nest' in 1877. (p207)



John Wills had also told me that he was working on his great-grandfather's correspondence, making abstracts for the family. A visit to him in Norwich gave me a sight of 27 leather-bound volumes – a mammoth task, well in hand with three volumes of abstracts already issued, as well as a volume of letters between Alfred Wills and his father printed verbatim, edited by John's cousin David Wills. Equally fascinating were books of photographs of the Eagle's Nest and its surroundings: full-plate records of life there in its heyday.

Bill Norton also put me in touch with another cousin, Peter Norton, who visited the Eagle's Nest for the first time in 1922 at the age of nine, and had many tales to tell of pre-war visitors and climbs around the valley – 'there were giants in those days', he wrote in a letter inviting me to Sussex to look at the chalet archives. Here I found the *Livre des Voyageurs*, an imposing volume bound in green leather embossed with the eagle's nest motif and with a delightful pencil drawing of the chalet bordered by watercolours of local wild flowers as its frontispiece. There were also three volumes of Logs of the doings of the inhabitants and two copies of a history of the chalet written by Wills's eldest daughter Edith, as well as several more volumes of photographs.

This wealth of material gives remarkable insight into the leisure life of an English family in the Alps at that time, but there is altogether too much material to do justice to in one short article; it would be good if one day someone were to use it to write a book. For the present, we shall have to content ourselves with some glimpses.

One of the most significant features of Wills's mountaineering was his close relationship with one particular guide, Auguste Balmat; indeed, he was one of the first of the gentleman mountaineers to develop the close bond with his guide which was to be such an important feature of the Golden Age. By the time the Eagle's Nest was completed in 1860, Balmat was employed by Wills on a more or less exclusive basis. A letter from Geneva dated August 1861 to his fiancée Bertha Taylor mentions being assailed by a Prussian 'savant' who wanted to be taken to Sixt, and also desired the services of Balmat on Mont Blanc: both requests were refused.¹¹ Wills and Bertha were married that autumn and from this time on, the main source of information about the chalet is the *Short History*, compiled by Edith Sarah (Wills) Norton in the 1930s from letters between her father (AW) and her stepmother (BW) and her own old diaries.¹² Balmat's death is described at length.

Unusually for a guide, Balmat's responsibilities continued in the valley, and he was entrusted with Wills's business affairs in connection with the building of the Eagle's Nest, a period of 22 months when AW did not go abroad. In June 1862 Bertha, then about six months pregnant, together with Edith and Jack, the children of the first marriage, travelled ahead to the chalet – 'BW carried up in a *chaise à porteurs*'. Everywhere there were signs of Balmat's industry: plantings of English rhododendrons, holly, privet

* Sadly, Peter Norton died in March 1995

and many roses (none of which appear to survive today). When AW arrived in August, Balmat fell ill with what Edith describes as 'softening of the brain'. As the patient became worse, his sister Angélique came over from Chamonix to nurse him, prescribing an alarming regime of leeches, blisters, mustard poultices and heaps of bedclothes, moaning '*Pauvre Auguste*' over him from morning to night. Wills appears not to have been happy with this treatment. Edith continues: 'Although AW ordered the mustard to be locked up, Angélique got at it and his feet were tied up on a horrid mess of mustard and linseed – quite dry and hard – and then wrapped in a thick worsted jacket.' After Wills took over the nursing, Balmat 'improved a little, but his mind was completely gone and he did not recollect anything from hour to hour and talked much nonsense. Worse remained, for it transpired that his affairs were hopelessly entangled. He had borrowed money to lend to others but had nothing to show for it and was being pressed on every side for thousands of francs. Money sent him by AW had not been used to pay workmen, as intended, and AW had already paid £70 twice over, and was constantly finding out fresh delinquencies.' Worse still, it was found that Balmat had forged a bill for 4000 francs: Wills appears to have had to find the money so that Balmat would not be prosecuted, but took the view that the rest of his affairs were in such a muddle that it was best not to intervene. Balmat died at the Eagle's Nest on 27 September 1862 – his debts, estimated at over £500 (in money of the time), appear to have died with him. Edith ends her account of the year by mentioning the unexpected birth of a son to her stepmother in Paris on the way home to England. 'Poor BW! What a summer holiday!'

After Balmat's death, Wills's climbing exploits were chiefly devoted to his own neighbourhood, including two first ascents on the Pic de Tenneverge as well as occasional expeditions over the Col d'Anterne to the mountains around Chamonix, and to other parts of the Alps. The early volumes of the Log of the Eagle's Nest are missing, but Peter Norton remembered that there were at least a dozen routes in the Vallée des Fonds which were regularly climbed by visitors to the chalet. The rock of the lower slopes of Mont Buet is an extremely friable shale, a considerable challenge to those used, for example, to the solid granite of the Chamonix aiguilles, and the family became adept at dealing with what the rest of us would describe as 'bad rock'. Tom Longstaff, who frequently visited the Eagle's Nest between the wars, commented that the Norton family were very careful climbers: 'when they have finished with their hand-holds they always replace them!' Lieut-General E F Norton (father of Bill) said that it was an excellent training ground for the higher slopes of Mount Everest, training which he had put to good use when he reached a high point of 28,126ft while leading the 1924 expedition.

Photographs of the Eagle's Nest from the 1870s and 1880s show the chalet overflowing with visitors. A family group taken in about 1887 has Wills – wearing the new-fangled knickerbockers which he had described as 'a

piece of foppery' a few years earlier – presiding over assorted children, grandchildren and servants, under a painted sign 'The Will's Arms – Good Beds'. Further beds were provided in the *Succursale*, and the *Buanderie* dealt with what must have been mountains of laundry. Both buildings have now disappeared. Topographical features were all given names: for instance, 'Tent Wood' commemorated the spot where a darkroom was set up by a visiting photographer; the 'Via Salutis' was a path on which hard physical work helped Wills regain his health after a breakdown in 1871.

The summer visits to the chalet clearly brought Wills much satisfaction: in his summary of the 1891 season in the Visitors' Book, for example, he wrote: 'Our season has been a great and confirmed success. I do not know how to believe that I am in my 63rd year. Everything has gone well and happily, and things are thoroughly well ordered at the nest.' But time was marching on, and in 1902 he spent his last summer at the chalet, making a gift of it two years later to his daughter Edith, by then Mrs Edward Norton. Wills died on 9 August 1912, and thereafter the history of the chalet largely refers to the Norton family.

The First World War left the chalet unscathed. Edith notes that on arrival in July 1919 they 'found everything unchanged, and our old clothes dry and fit to put on after 5 years'. The family itself did not fare so well: Edith lost a son, Richard (R C Norton on the memorial in Sixt), as well as many friends and locals from the valley. Tragedy struck again in March 1933, when another son, Eric, was killed with a friend by an avalanche below the Col d'Anterne – the first (and only) serious accident in all the years the Wills/Norton family owned the chalet. Edith herself died at the Eagle's Nest in August 1936 and was buried in the churchyard at Sixt. It had been her 55th summer at the chalet, and obituary notices in the local papers speak of her as a woman of unequalled simple generosity and kindness, much loved in the area.

The entry in the Log for 22 August 1939 – in the hand of Edith's eldest son, J H Norton – reads 'We leave in a state of great uncertainty with all the usual regrets'. These misgivings were well placed, for when JHN, with his brother E F Norton, returned in June 1946, for the first time after the War, he notes 'Chalet in an indescribable state of destruction and filth'. After a brief look inside they had to go up the valley to look at the wild flowers as an antidote to the shock. A caretaker had been paid throughout the War, but when the chalet was taken over by the Maquis there was little he could do. In 1947 it was decided to sell – the locals were 'sad and amazed' – and the following summer the chalet was let to a potential purchaser who was sufficiently serious to instal electric wiring at his own expense. Nothing came of this, and Norton family parties (including, for the first time, Bill) spent short holidays there in 1949 and 1953.

In 1956, 'Mr Charles Lucas of Librairie Charles Lucas St Cloud visited Sixt as a tourist with his wife and children. He heard that the chalet was for sale and went up and looked at it. Subsequently he came to England ...

to see JHN to negotiate purchase.' The final entry in the History, dated 1958, reads: 'Permission to sell was at last obtained from the Treasury, and the Chalet became Lucas property on March 1st ... Sic transit'.

So ended an association with a British mountaineering family which had lasted just one hundred years, but the Eagle's Nest still stands proudly at the head of the Giffre valley as a monument to Sir Alfred Wills and his successors as proof of their love for this part of France and their determination to make a successful summer home there.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

- 1 *AJ26*, 478, 1912.
- 2 *AJ27*, 47, 1913.
- 3 *AC Register*, ed. A L Mumm, 383.
- 4 Ronald W Clark, *The Victorian Mountaineers*. Batsford, 1953.
- 5 The 'two local chamois hunters' were Christian Almer (then aged 28) and his brother-in-law Ulrich Kaufmann, both later to become leading Grindelwald guides. See also Note 7, p445, A W Moore, *The Alps in 1864*, (Blackwell's edition 1939).
- 6 Sir Alfred Wills, *Wanderings among the High Alps*, 2nd edition. R Bentley, 278, 1858. (This book was dedicated to Auguste Balmat.)
- 7 A Mr Welby.
- 8 Sir Alfred Wills, "*The Eagle's Nest*" in the Valley of Sixt; a summer home in the Alps; together with some excursions among the great glaciers. 2nd edition, Longman, 95, 1860.
- 9 *Ibid*, 102.
- 10 *Ibid*, Frontispiece.
- 11 *Letters from Alfred Wills to Bertha Taylor, 1860-61*, ed John Wills. Published privately.
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