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REVIEWS.

The Great Beast; the life of Aleister Crowley. By John Symonds. Pp. 316. Rider and Co., London. 1951. 218.

Several books, written recently, have referred to Aleister Crowley, but Mr. Symonds, his literary executor, gives us the fullest picture of the man. Of his capacities as a mountaineer we hear little; yet since this, and chess-playing, were among the few passable features of Crowley's life, more might perhaps have been said.

He claimed to have learned to climb rocks in the British Isles in 1890 and 1893,¹ and he was elected to the S.M.C. on December 7, 1894,² his proposer and seconder being A.E. Maylard and J. Norman Collie. Between 1894 and 1898 he went yearly to the Alps, and in 1894 he made the climbs on Beachy Head about which he corresponded with Mummery³ and on which he contributed an illustrated article to the *S.M.C. Journal* (vol. iii, 288 sqq.). His best year in the Alps would seem to have been 1895, when he claimed the Eiger (alone),⁴ Eigerjoch, Jungfrauoch, Mönch (traversed from Wengen), Jungfrau from the Rottalsattel and an attempt from the Guggi Glacier, Wetterlücke, Mönchjoch, Beichgrat, Petersgrat and Tschingelhorn.⁵

Up to 1898 his climbing career appeared to be, if not outstanding, at least promising, though somewhat erratic, and there was abundant testimony, by men as competent to judge as Norman Collie, Maylard, Solly, H.V. Reade, Eckenstein and Larden (and others still living) that he was a very capable climber, particularly on rocks (though Maylard also thought him the best amateur step-cutter he had seen); and only Larden was disposed to regard him as reckless. But after this date, beyond boulder clambering and work with crampons in the Geánt ice-fall⁶ and elsewhere, and some mountain treks in Mexico, he seems to have done little climbing except for his two well-known Himalayan expeditions, to K2 (1902) and to Kanchenjunga (1905). Mr. Symonds does not whitewash Crowley during these trips, but we learn nothing really new. He appears as a consistently unpleasant man, falling out with his companions; and he 'wrote himself off' in the estimation of all moun-

taineers when he refused to go out to help in an accident on Kanchenjunga by which four men were killed and three others endangered. He justified himself later in the Press by saying he was not over-anxious to render help, as a mountain accident 'is one of the things for which I have no sympathy whatever'; and, though he claimed to be the only competent climber on the mountain, 'the doctor is old enough to rescue himself, and nobody would want to rescue Righi'.⁷ His climbing career, which had started out well, thus petered out in discredit, as the sadism, the chronic disarticulation of the moral sense, and all those attributes that made him a shoddy mountebank in everything else he did, corrupted the saving grace that the mountains might have brought him.

The bulk of the volume is concerned with Crowley's main life-work, those weird and disreputable incursions into occultism that formed a façade for unbridled indulgence in every revolting form of sensual vice. The book, indeed, makes rather tedious reading, being largely a succession of drugging, suicides, debauchery, starvation, misery of all sorts, without any relieving features. Crowley was an absurd as well as a degenerate individual; whatever good traits he had, Mr. Symonds fails to bring them out. Yet some superficially attractive qualities he must have had, if only to explain how not a few well-known men made friends with him, though almost all seem to have been disillusioned in time. For the most part, his associates were neurotics and the riff-raff of various efforts to construct systems of esoteric mysticism. Crowley himself appears to have produced no new ideas; he borrowed them, as he borrowed money, without making any return. His wretched Abbey at Cefalù in Sicily does not compare with eighteenth-century Medmenham; Wilkes, Dashwood and the others of the Hell-Fire Club were a virile, almost respectable set of men compared with the insipid decadents of Crowley's group.

A certain consistency ran through his life; the boy whose hero was Nana Sahib and who wished he had been at Cawnpore to help in the slaughtering; the husband who, at the birth of his first child, was said to have conducted a magical ceremony, whilst his wife was in labour, intended to make her produce a monster; the pinchbeck Messiah who showed his divinity by defecating on his friends' carpets, or by eating excrement and human flesh; the artist who advertised for models who should be dwarfs, hunchbacks, freaks of all sorts, but only if exceptionally ugly or deformed; the poet whose verse was described by a *Westminster Gazette* reviewer as making one constantly

think of the young men who stood outside Delmonicos, picking their teeth in order to suggest to the casual passer-by that they had been dining inside;⁸ 'slice him where you will,' as Bertie Wooster would say, he seems rotten all through, and his Trinity contemporaries who threw him, one term, into the fountain, for being dirty—all round—knew their business.⁹ Indeed, as one puts down the book one is tempted to think, like a writer to *The Pioneer* on August 24, 1905, that not merely the sport of mountaineering, but the world at large, would have suffered no loss if Kanchenjunga had permanently effaced Crowley.

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1. *The Pioneer* (Allahabad), Oct. 15, 1905.

2. *S.M.C.J.*, iii, 228.

3. *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley*, vol i, pp. 108-109.

4. *The Confessions*, vol i, p. 119.

5. The list is a little deceptive; it is not clear that either the [South] Eigerjoch or the Jungfrauoch were crossed, and the inference is that both were simply visited from the eastern flank. Similarly, the Wetterlücke is, as seems likely, it was merely reached from the Petersgrat, amounts to nothing, for it is only on the northern side that it presents any problems. For details of Crowley's climbs, see *S.M.J.C.* iii; iv, 61, 242; v, 40, 195; and W. Larden, *Walks and Climbs around Arolla*, pp. 38, 49/50, 69/70, 84, 118.

6. Longstaff, *This my Voyage*, p. 23.

7. See criticisms in *A.J.* xxiii, 51-4. Alcesti de Righi was a young Italian member of the expedition, who had been knocked senseless and half buried during the accident. 'The doctor' referred to was J. Jacot-Guillarmod.

8. I am indebted to Mr. Winthrop Young for this reference.

9. Not that they were alone in expressing their views forcefully; one of the most justly revered members of the Alpine Club today looks back complacently to the year 1895, when he gave Crowley a severe thrashing and a black eye!