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Visitors' books and registers in nineteenth-century Chamonix: ordering the sublime

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ABSTRACT

A dense network of registers and albums existed in Chamonix, making it one of the most exemplary sites of nineteenth-century visitors' book culture. A significant number of these books have survived, enabling us to better understand the functions they served, and how they fit into the wider history of Chamonix's development. This was among other things a history of ordering, as the article shows in regard to the valley's historiography and to the development of its infrastructure. Focusing on travelogues and on several visitors' books and registers, the article examines how these books participated in these ordering processes.

KEYWORDS

Visitors' books; registers; guidebooks; Alps; nineteenth century; history of tourism

On 23 July 1854, the following passage, in French, was entered in the *livre des étrangers*, or visitors' book, at the Montanvert,¹ a belvedere overlooking Chamonix's Mer de glace, one of nineteenth-century Europe's most popular natural attractions:

Meys Guillaume of Brussels climbed here this morning in magnificent weather, as explained above, and left again for the *jardin*. 3 hours for the return from the *jardin* to Mont Brévent. (*Montanvert*)²

According to one contemporary source, visitors were requested to enter only their names in *livres des étrangers*, yet sublime scenery and exorbitant prices often also inspired a "medley of observations" in prose or verse, to the amusement of fellow tourists (Smith 1864, 48). It is these non-prescriptive inscriptions, including longer or more unusual comments, sketches, and album verse, that have mainly drawn the attention of historians of tourism, allowing them to claim visitors' books as the site of individual self-fashioning. Kevin James (2012, 63), for instance, argues that they "offered space for experimental self-expression", whereas Rita Singer (2016) considers them as "micro-forms of travel writing" and Alan McNee (2020) as a means of "democratic and demotic" emancipation. These interpretations overlap with Peter Hansen's influential thesis that the "discovery" of the Alps, and notably Chamonix, went hand in hand with the quest for individual sovereignty (2013). Like alpine tourism, in other words, visitors' books have most often been understood as expressions of the modern, liberal self. In the above passage, however,

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Guillaume Meys only provides a brief comment on the weather, itinerary and walking time, a barebone inscription that suggests a modest sense of personal accomplishment but little else. Indeed, if some nineteenth-century tourists composed “idiosyncratic” entries (McNee 2020, 3), the majority stuck to conventional formulae, most often leaving only their name and place of origin, making it hard to consider visitors’ books as anything more than glorified registers.

Covering the years 1854–1869, the *Livre des étrangers de Montanvert* is a leather-bound, in-quarto volume containing 788 column-free pages that was most likely kept at the reception or in the dining room of the Hôtel du Montanvert, a mountain inn built in 1840.³ Of the 660 visitors who signed the Montanvert book the same month as Guillaume Meys, only fifty left a comment (most of these on the weather or itinerary), three sketched a drawing, and one composed a short poem.⁴ Meys’ generic inscription nevertheless gains in interest when we read it alongside another entry he left a day later in the *Livre d’or de la Croix de la Flégère*, a 635-page, folio-sized album, Chamonix valley’s earliest extant visitors’ book, spanning the years 1832–1855 with a hiatus in 1848, which was placed in the pavilion, or mountain hut, built close to a spectacular viewing point across the valley from the Montanvert (Debarbieux 2001, 44; Cuenod 2013, 137; Vincent 2020). The Belgian tourist wrote the following in the *Flégère* book: “Meys Guillaume of Brussels after having visited Chamonix the Montanvert the Mer de Glace and le Jardin visited la Flégère on 24 July 1854” (*Flégère*).⁵ Repeating the itinerary of the previous day and adding the Flégère to his list, this second entry documents Meys’ movement over two days, a sequence that not only personalises the information we have on him by giving narrative shape to his experience, but that also enables us to “track” (Durie 2011) tourists’ movements in Chamonix more generally, and reminds us that tourism usually depends on visiting sites in a particular order.

Guillaume Meys, as I will show below, was following the itinerary recommended in most period guidebooks, suggesting that by the mid-nineteenth century, achieving a “summit position” (Hansen 2013, 3) was an illusion for most tourists, the effect of what René van der Duim and his colleagues, drawing on Actor-Network theory (ANT), have called tourism’s “careful ordering and reordering of heterogeneous materials” (van der Duim, Ren and Johanneson, 2013, 9). In the rest of this article, I examine how visitors’ books and registers in Chamonix participated in tourism’s ordering processes. My idea of order stems not from a Foucauldian theory of knowledge and power (Foucault 1989), but rather from recent ANT theoreticians’ more apolitical descriptions of tourism’s attempts to manage experience, notably by restructuring traditional places, spaces, and cultures into networks of people, objects, organisations, technologies, and protocols (Franklin 2008; van der Duim, Ren and Johanneson, 2013). Like other modern social organisations, tourism is constituted of complex networks connecting human and non-human actors, or “actants”. These include visitors’ books and registers, which, as examples of “intellectual technology”, are both subjective speech acts and material objects with their own agency (Latour 2005, 76). By notably helping to mediate but also to order tourist experiences, visitors’ books facilitate social interactions at the tourist site itself and beyond it: what van der Duim (2005) has coined as “tourismsapes” refers to networks that “transgr[ess] different societies and regions” (van der Duim, Ren and Johanneson, 2013, 5, 31). Chamonix, which was transformed in less than fifty years from an often-exaggerated condition of isolation to a remarkable state of interconnectedness with the

outside world, provides an early and well-documented example of a “tourismscape”. While my aim is not to reconstruct or map out Chamonix’s actor networks, I do wish to better understand visitors’ books and registers’ ordering function within the valley’s extended social organisation, interpreting them institutionally and not simply as sources of individual self-expression.

Sir Gavin de Beer’s well-known article on poet Percy Bysshe Shelley’s Greek inscriptions in Chamonix (de Beer, 1958) suggests that the valley contained a particularly dense network of registers and albums, making it one of the most exemplary sites of nineteenth-century visitors’ book culture. Much like in Zermatt (Michalkiewicz and Vincent, 2016), a significant number of these books have survived, enabling us to study them both individually, and, when possible, as part of a network. In addition to Shelley’s controversial page, removed from the Hôtel de Londres register and recently rediscovered,⁶ our project has found three blank-page albums from the Montanvert, the Flégère, and the Refuge des Grand Mulets (1861–1875), pre-formatted registers from six hotels spanning the years 1864–1923, and a client register from 1845 to 1854 belonging to the Compagnie des guides. I also draw on a dozen printed and unpublished travelogues as well as several guidebooks to contextualise these visitors’ books. The history of tourism in Chamonix was among other things a history of ordering, as I will show in my next section in regard to the valley’s historiography and to the development of its infrastructure, including roads, hotels and pavilions, guidebooks, and guiding services. In the following section, I concentrate on metacommentary from travelogues and other sources, as well as on entries from the *Montanvert* and *Flégère* albums, to argue that visitors’ books participated in Chamonix’s ordering processes by regulating’s tourists’ movements and comments, notably in regard to the sublime.

A history of ordering

As many historians have shown, Chamonix was one of the earliest valleys in the Alps to cater to the new fashion for the sublime, regularly adapting its touristic infrastructure to accommodate the exponential rise in visitor numbers (Coolidge 1889; Debarbieux 2001; Guyot 2011; Cuenot 2013; Hansen 2013). In 1816, Shelley was already complaining about the new social arrangements created to manage this invasion, writing that “a whole army of aubergistes and guides, and indeed the whole mass of the population, subsist on the weakness and credulity of travellers, as leeches subsist on the sick” (Shelley and Shelley [1817] 1989, 170–171). By 1838, John Murray III’s popular *Handbook for Travellers in Switzerland* could assert that Chamonix was “now a large and important community, which displays almost the bustle of an English watering place in the most retired, heretofore, of the alpine valleys” (Murray [1838] 1970, 291). His comment plays on one of Chamonix’s most familiar myths, that the valley was “discovered” in 1741 by two eccentric Britons, Richard Pococke and William Windham, who supposedly opened it up to the world (Coolidge 1889, 25). Until the long history of Chamonix was unearthed by Markham Sherwill during the 1820s (Sherwill 1832), this myth of origins was spread by travellers and guidebooks alike, including in M. G. J. Ebel’s influential *Manuel du voyageur en Suisse* (1829–1830, 87). Three decades later, the travel writer and impresario Albert Smith continued to repeat the story even though Murray among others had discredited it (Smith 1841, 577; Murray [1838] 1970, 293). Hansen writes that this so-called discovery

served as “a foundation myth in narratives of mountaineering and modernity” (Hansen 2013, 3).⁷ But the myth of this Shangri-La like valley also helped attract non-climbers, making the story of Chamonix’s discovery as much a foundation myth of tourism as of mountaineering, in turn influencing the historiography of the valley, which often emphasises the ordering and re-ordering of events.

In his early history of Swiss travel, for instance, William Brevoort Coolidge calls Pococke and Windham “the first men who visited it as tourists [...] the forerunners of thousands of later travellers” (1889, 25–28). Escorted by a phalanx of guides, porters, and servants carrying tents, weapons, and other equipment, their siege-like excursion to the Montanvert anticipated the militaristic logistics of modern tour operators such as Thomas Cook, who needed to order and control the surrounding world in order to be commercially viable (Franklin 2008, 33). Coolidge on the other hand devotes much space to dispelling another of the valley’s foundation myths, the creation of the Hôtels de Londres and d’Angleterre, reconstituting the real order in which Chamonix’s hotels were constructed. His narrative begins with Marie-Thérèse Coutterand’s *auberge* built around 1779, which later became the Hôtel d’Angleterre, and ends with the inauguration of the Grand Hôtel Couttet in 1868, by then one of seven large establishments in the valley (Coolidge 1889, 203–204). More recent histories have also devoted space to these hotels’ sometimes complicated chronology as well as to the order in which roads and other infrastructure were built and to the controversial creation of the Compagnie des guides, giving us a sense of ordering’s importance in shaping the valley’s tourism industry. Bertrand Debarbieux (2001, 9), in his study of the valley’s economic development after it voted to become French in 1860, compares this industry to an oft-repeated and well-ordered show [“une composition parfaitement réglée”] performed by local actors and tourists alike.

What facilitated this controlled development, according to Debarbieux, was Chamonix’s tradition of communally-managed pastoral land, which remained strong throughout the nineteenth century. As in other alpine regions, grazing lands were managed as collective property and in egalitarian fashion. Tourism also came to be seen as their common patrimony: throughout the century there was a strong political and social will to manage the influx of foreigners as a collective good and to spread the wealth that went with it (Debarbieux 2001, 13, 27, 31). Under both Sardinian and French sovereignty, the local municipality, in which both guides and hoteliers were well represented, played an active role in developing and managing the valley’s tourism infrastructure (39–40; see, also, Martinoia 2017). The authorities wanted to control the risks associated with the valley’s alpine setting. The Compagnie des guides, for example, was established in July 1821 in response to a climbing accident the summer before that killed three guides and their Russian client (Hansen 2013, 152–153; see also, Chaubet 1994). But there were other contingencies to control as well, including social indigence and begging, bad roads, and the lack of sufficient accommodation. By routinising, or “black-boxing” (van der Duim, Ren and Johanneson, 2013, 3) the interactions between the sector’s various actors, Chamonix’s town council was gradually able to control all these uncertainties, allowing more and more tourists to flock to the alpine valley.

Chamonix’s surviving visitors’ books and registers can help confirm the various estimates that have been advanced since the mid-nineteenth century regarding visitor numbers, which increased tenfold in less than a century. In 1783, three years before Mont Blanc’s first ascent, 1,500 visitors are said to have visited during the summer

season, whereas 4,000 came in 1830, 5,000 in 1850, and roughly 12,000–20,000 in 1865 (Coolidge 1889, 205; Debarbieux 2001, 21; Colley 2010, 20; Hansen 2013, 177). The steepest increase occurred during the 1850s and 1860s, as we can see in the *Flégère* book. Unlike hotel registers, inscription in this and other albums was voluntary, so that not everyone signed it. Moreover, not all entries are legible, family members and domestic servants often go unmentioned, and, despite the fact that it was accessible by mule and could be “most generally attained by ladies” (Murray [1838] 1970, 295), the lookout point drew only a small portion of Chamonix’s tourists, as we shall see later. The book nevertheless indicates a 500% spike in visitors between 1833 and 1852 that increases sharply toward the middle of the century [see Figure 1]. British tourists largely outnumbered all other national origins, including French, German, and Swiss. More surprisingly perhaps, the number of Americans also increased dramatically during this period, becoming the second source of visitors. The national origins represented jumped from eleven to twenty-three, and the length of the season expanded from three to six months. Contemporary accounts in various languages give us a sense of this cosmopolitan energy, which at times seemed to border on chaos, signalling the reordering of the touristic space in similar ways across nationalities in a broad textual field. In his German-language guidebook, for example, Ebel describes the “swarms of guides” awaiting their clients (Ebel 1829–1830, 87), French travel writer Désiré Raoul-Rochette mentions the “swarm of dumb admirers” at the Bossons glacier and everywhere else in the valley, which make him think of a London thoroughfare (Raoul Rochette 1822, 348), whereas Murray notes more diplomatically that “it is impossible to imagine the bustle and excitement of a visit to Chamouny” (Murray [1838] 1970, 292).

Despite significant topographical hurdles, new roads and transportation technologies, but also laws and protocols, were imagined to order this influx of tourists, helping connect the valley with the rest of the world. Thanks to the creation of a daily diligence service, for example, it took ten hours to reach Chamonix from Geneva in 1828 as opposed to eighteen in 1818 (Gaze 1861, 79; Cuenot 2013, 115). In Geneva, travellers were advised to leave

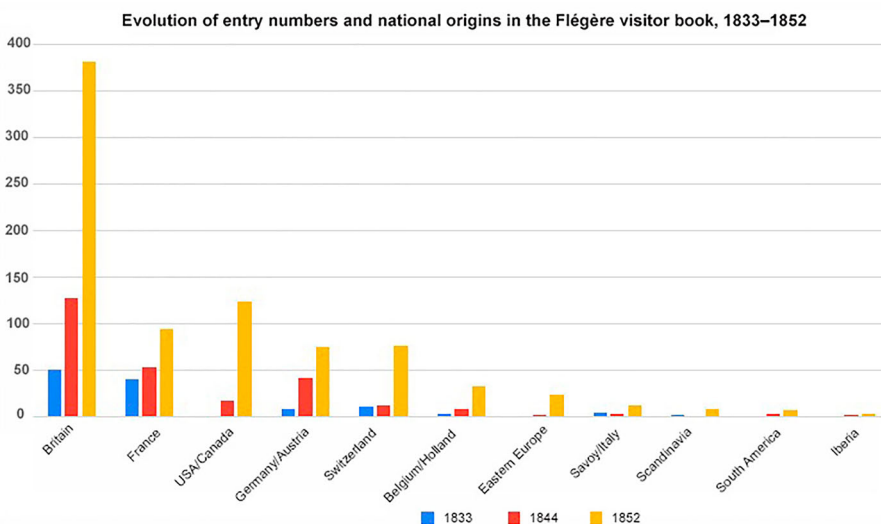


Figure 1. Evolution of entry numbers and national origins in the *Flégère* visitors’ book, 1833–1852.

their private vehicles in town or to send them on to Martigny. They could then either take the diligence or hire a private *calèche* to St. Martin where they had to switch to mules or a *char à banc* in order to go up the infamous “montée Pellissier”, a climb that significantly hindered the stage between Servoz and les Houches (Murray [1838] 1970, 284; Cuenot 2013, 114). Thomas Cook mentions that these diligences were open in the back, enabling passengers to admire the view, and that places had to be reserved ahead of time at the Diligence office, which entered passengers’ names in a register (1865, 70). Cook of course simplified the logistics of travelling to Chamonix when he introduced his system of “circular tickets”, which, after 1863 could be purchased in specific hotels in Geneva and Lausanne in order to enable tourists to go on a two-day side-trip to Chamonix (1865, 69).

Guides and couriers hired in Geneva not only showed the way, but also helped maintain order by warding off what Murray calls “nuisances,” including beggars, women and children selling food and beverages, and dealers in fake minerals or cannon echoes, all symptoms of Savoy’s notorious poverty (Murray [1838] 1970, 286; Wordsworth 1820, 16 Sept. 1820). The Sardinian state also very quickly established its control over passports, fares and other matters relating to transport to and from the valley, and official couriers donning uniforms of blue and gold were given certain privileges (Raffles 1819, 169; Murray [1838] 1970, 284). Visitors were required to show a visa that could be obtained from the Sardinian consul in London, or in Geneva upon exchange of a passport. This visa was regularly checked, including at the border at Annemasse as well as on the road (Agassiz 1833, 233; Smith 1841; Murray [1838] 1970, 286). By the second half of the century, the construction of railroads and the printing of new travel aids such as *Bradshaw’s Continental Railway Guide* (first ed. 1853) enabled Britons to plan a trip from London to Chamonix in less than fifty-six hours and for only 165 francs. As Albert Smith (1853, v–x) writes, the intrepid traveller could “sit down to his dinner looking out at the sunset on Mont Blanc on the third day of his departure”. For those passing through Basel, this time was cut in half to twenty-six hours. A municipal road between Sallenches and Chamonix was completed in 1866, shortening the trip even further and demonstrating the new French sovereign’s interest in tourist development (Cuénot 2013, 170; Debarbieux 2001, 60). According to Ann Colley (2010, 20), “these newly opened routes disqualified these travellers’ sense of the remote, the serene, and the inaccessible.”

The history of Chamonix’s hotels, which depended on private entrepreneurship rather than on state initiatives, is more complex, even disordered. Hotel owners competed against one another and grew significantly wealthier than the rest of the population (Debarbieux 2001, 45), leading to the consolidation of individual hotels into luxury establishments, as the titles of the extant registers attest. The Hôtel Royal et de l’Union, for example, was the product of an earlier merger between the Hôtel de l’Union, founded in 1816, and the valley’s oldest establishment, the Hôtel d’Angleterre, but also of the 1848 transformation of the Hôtel de la Tour into the Hôtel Royal (Cuenot 2013, 160). These establishments were particularly attentive to the needs of their clientele. Hotel guests were often surprised to be able to find dinner prepared “in the plain English style”, rooms exceeding British hotels in comfort, and even mineral baths at l’Union (Wordsworth 1820, 17 Sept. 1820; Webb 1827, 317; Murray [1838] 1970, 291). Yet the state very quickly sought to regulate these businesses as well. From 1791 onwards, hotels and inns were legally required to register all their guests, as we see in the

official notices pasted or hand written onto the flyleaf of several hotel registers (Hôtel de la Poste, Grand Hôtel Couttet). Passed after Revolutionary France annexed Chamonix, the new law of 19–22 July 1791 on the organisation of municipal police stipulated that inn keepers had to take down their guests' name, employment (*qualité*), permanent address, time of arrival and of departure. The mayor and police were authorised to verify the books whenever they chose; those who failed to register a client, concealed information, or even crossed out words could be steeply fined, explaining why the surviving hotel registers, all from after 1860, closely follow this legal format.

Chamonix's municipality also encouraged the private construction of mountain pavilions on communally-owned and leased land in places such as La Flégère, Le Chapeau and Montanvert, notably to limit the number of women and children selling refreshments along mountain trails, but also as a source of revenue (Debarbieux 2001, 41–44; Cuenot 2013, 136–137). The valley's most salient example of ordering, however, was the creation of the Compagnie des guides de Chamonix in July 1821 to regulate the guiding business. While historians still debate the exact role played by the vice-intendant of Faucigny in establishing the Compagnie, there is no doubt that Chamonix's local authorities were essential (Martinoia 2017, 94–96). They were responding to a climbing accident, but also wanted to ward off foreign competition, redistribute the wealth generated by guiding more equally (notably through the creation of an emergency fund), lessen tensions among locals, and end harassment complaints (Hansen 2013, 152–153; see, also, Chaubet 1994). Debarbieux interprets the creation of the Compagnie as the legacy of the valley's communal management of its patrimony, not simply as a corporatist gesture. No specific knowledge was needed to work as a patented guide, the only requirement being that one had to be a native of the valley; the guiding business was thus controversially closed to outsiders (see Martinoia 2017). Because of the swift increase in tourism, the number of guides climbed from thirty-four in 1821–270 in 1860, or roughly 10% of the population (Debarbieux 2001, 27–34). Strict rules and protocols determined every aspect of guiding and portaging in Chamonix. "The guides, mules, and all affairs that can be regulated by the state, to guard against disputes, is here in the hands of a syndic, who, as guide en chef, has a code of laws, and tariff of charges, which all must obey" (Murray [1838] 1970, 293). According to Debarbieux (2001, 32), the Compagnie kept ten registers to monitor its activities, including a register of guides, a register of complaints, and a register of punishments: "One can measure from this the measure of social control that the local population wanted to apply to this activity."

This social ordering can be clearly seen in the *Registre des courses 1845–1854*, a 750-page folio-sized register primarily used as an accounting tool. The book is divided into thirteen columns spanning two pages. In the first is the number ascribed to each outing, followed by the name and origin of tourists, the place they came from, the dates of the beginning and end of the outing, the destination, the name of the guide(s), the date of payment, the amount withheld from the guide's salary, the amount he received, the proof of payment, and observations. A precise quantitative analysis of the *Registre des courses*'s data on visitors is unfortunately not possible, its main function being to tabulate the significant revenue generated each year by the Compagnie.⁸ One may nevertheless use the register to estimate the proportion of visitors travelling to each site – in 1853, for example, over fifty percent went to the Montanvert, thirty

percent to the Flégère, while the last twenty percent hired guides to visit various other places, including, with increasing frequency, the Mont Blanc. The Compagnie reshaped Chamonix into distinct itineraries organised as lucrative commodities, helping transform the valley into what John Ruskin dismissively called “show places” (1978, 286). Its hoteliers, moreover, paid the guides to arrange their excursions to coincide with the hours of the *tables d’hôtes* (Flégère 24 July 1847). By the middle of the century, the guiding system was extremely well-oiled, so much so in fact that the Compagnie long resisted any improvements. In an 1862 article in a local paper, the journalist regrets that “the spirit of routine has stifled until today the spirit of progress” (quoted in Debarbieux 2001, 58). When a request for a concession to build a train to the Montanvert was made thirty years later, it created an uproar, the guides and muleteers seeing it as a threat to their livelihood – the train line was not built until 1908.

The most controversial feature of the Compagnie des guides was the rule that clients could not choose their guides, who were assigned according to a fixed number and quota, which predetermined the order in which they could be hired. This legally prescribed imposition was unique to Chamonix and became unpopular among members of the Alpine Club, who obtained special conditions in 1862,⁹ but also among hoteliers who wanted to bypass the Compagnie’s monopoly and recommend guides themselves, and even among tourists, who resented the lack of choice and guides’ occasional incompetence. These complaints led to the temporary closure of the Compagnie in 1848 and 1859, and to its dissolution and complete reinvention after 1892 (Debarbieux 2001, 50; Martinoia 2017, 100–104). The strange practice of assigning guides by rote was regularly commented on in travelogues, and satirised in books and periodicals (Wordsworth 1820, 16 Sept. 1820; Brockedon 1833, 19–20; Agassiz 1833, 242; Morrell 1962, 27; Twain 2003, 255). In a fictionalised travel account written by Mary Taylor, a friend of Charlotte Brontë and an early climber, the author imagines a character named Frau Mutter, one of five female protagonists touring the Alps, who unrelentingly questions a Compagnie clerk:

“Could they not do without a guide office?”
 “Oh, no, Madame; every one must have his turn.”
 “But they don’t get their turn?”
 “But – but – it is to maintain order.”
 “Would there be any disorder if there were no bureau?”
 “Oh, no, Madame!”
 “Then, what is the bureau for?”
 “For! – For order.” ([Taylor] 1875, 17)

While meant as a comment on the absurdity of assigning guides, this comic non-sequitur also demonstrates the importance that Chamonix’s local population ascribed to order. The narrator interprets this will to order, which “extends to mules, horses, and carriages as well as guides”, as a holdover from the Napoleonic era, which she sees not only as a form of state control, but also as a veiled attempt at economic extortion ([Taylor] 1875, 17–19). The passage highlights the different perception of state regulatory practices between France and England, Britons often fiercely defending their perceived autonomy, and resisting the ordering processes shaping tourism on the Continent.

As travel in the Alps became more and more routinised, the perception of danger dwindled and tourists began to question the obligation of hiring a guide at all. Although Murray still recommends their use, for example, he makes fun of the guides’ systematic

yet unnecessary warnings when crossing a ravine supposedly prone to avalanches: “The step from the sublime to the ridiculous, is here reduced to the smallest possible interval” (Murray [1838] 1970, 94). By 1863, Jemima Morrell could assert that “The dangers of Alpine travel may be divided into two classes, the real and the imaginary, and in the retrospect, it was found that ours all belonged to the latter” (1962, 4). The sheer number of tourists who visited the Montanvert and the Flégère, including women and children, helped tame these alpine excursions. What contributed most to this growing sense of security, however, was the development of guidebooks: by also re-ordering Chamonix into a consumable experience, these publications helped tourists become more independent, but also, paradoxically, regimented their behaviour.

The earliest guidebooks to the valley such as Marc Théodore Bourrit’s *Itinéraire de Genève, de Lausanne, et Chamouni* (1791) describes the route to Chamonix yet provides almost no practical information. Organised alphabetically, M. J. G. Ebel’s *Manuel du voyage en Suisse* (first German ed. 1795) is also parsimonious in detail and refuses to rank the different excursions, forcing tourists to continue relying on the valley’s guides. Murray’s 1838 *Handbook* on the other hand gives highly detailed descriptions of each itinerary that include times, prices, and level of risk, and lists them by order of priority: “If the traveller be pressed for time, and can only visit one of the spots of interest around Chamouny, it should be the Montanvert; if two, this and the Flégère” (Murray [1838] 1970, 295). A pioneer of organised travel, Henry Gaze (1861, 79) also recommends starting with the Mer de Glace, then crossing over to the Flégère to admire the panorama. His main competitor, Thomas Cook, leaves the choice of excursions open, only citing at length American author Harriet Beecher’s Stowe’s account of her ascent of the Flégère in 1853 (1865, 71–73). These two excursions feature prominently in Alfred Joanne’s *La Suisse* (1866, 66) and in Baedeker’s *Switzerland*, which recommends doing them both in a day if time is limited, and claims no guides are needed (1878, 214–215). An inventory of names in the *Montanvert* and *Flégère* albums between 12 July and 12 August 1854, the month in which Guillaume Meys visited, confirms these guidebooks’ prescriptive power: out of a total of 944 visitors, 644 visited only the Montanvert, whereas 107 visited both the Montanvert and the Flégère. The vast majority of the latter (101) followed the recommended order, first visiting the Montanvert, then the Flégère. As we can see, Meys’ itinerary was by no means original or the result of autonomous choices, but instead the product of a complex process of ordering and control, institutionalised by the Compagnie des guides and reinforced through guidebooks.

No one understood the process of ordering better than Albert Smith, who did so much to democratise travel to the Alps by helping to demystify and master them, but also by transforming them into a “theatrical space” (Colley 2010, 60–66; Hansen 2013; McNee 2015). Smith’s popular two-hour diorama cum lecture, *The Ascent of Mont Blanc*, which ran at Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly from 1852 to 1858, led audiences from London to Chamonix before taking them up the mountain itself, helping develop the Alps into a culture industry complete with merchandising (Colley 2010, 58). Smith significantly varied the arrangement of his show each season: he added new stage props such as passports, a mule’s bell, a waterfall, and even a live Saint Bernard dog that distributed chocolate to spectators; he changed the itinerary to make visitors pass via Geneva, Basel, or other routes; and he created new narrative threads between the various slides, including

imaginary visitors' book entries used for comic effect but also to express awe. The show thus highlighted the importance of ordering for tourism, reflecting the interactions between human and non-human actors, as well as the use of technology to shape viewer affects, notably the sublime. The fact that the *Ascent of Mont Blanc* could be performed over such a long period also shows how these processes were routinised, enabling almost a million spectators to travel to Chamonix vicariously. Visiting Chamonix's English Chapel, built in 1860, Jemima Morrell describes a slab honouring Smith (Morrell 1962, 28). Two decades later, Mark Twain stumbled across a metal plaque commemorating him in a Chamonix hotel (Twain 2003, 256). Indeed, one could find vestiges of Smith everywhere in nineteenth-century Chamonix, including in many of its visitors' books and registers. The writer notably signed his name four times in the *Flégère* album (12 July 1849, 8 August 1851, 19 September 1852, late September 1854). All of these are cross-referenced inside the back cover, transforming the book into a relic. By commemorating Albert Smith, the locals in Chamonix could put a face to a complex, impersonal process of ordering that restructured the valley into a modern social organisation, or what I called in my introduction a "tourismscape". As Twain quips, "Balmat and De Saussure discovered Mont Blanc – so to speak – but it was Smith who made it a paying property" (Twain 2003, 256).

Ordering the Sublime

Because of its rapid tourist development, but also its dense network of albums and registers, Chamonix very quickly became emblematic of nineteenth-century visitors' book culture in general. In this section, I wish to show how, like guidebooks, new transportation technologies, hotels, or the protocols regulating guiding, Chamonix's visitors' books participated in the valley's ordering process. Perhaps the most obvious way they did so was by keeping track of tourists' movements, reminding us of the porous distinction between registers and albums on the Continent. In a passage foreshadowing today's surveillance capitalism, Jemima Morrell writes that at the inn of the Barberine Pass, on the way out of Chamonix valley,

[W]e turned to examine the visitors' book, one of the most inquisitorial of its kind we ever met with – one not merely satisfied with knowing your present whereabouts but demanding on government authority the past, present and future of your history. The information we left behind us considerably enlightened those authorities! (Morell 1962, 34–35)

Morrell's comment indicates that Britons were not used to such policing because of the absence of prescriptive regimes of inscription back home (James 2012). As she rightly suggests, they often responded with disobliging, even disruptive comments.

Visitors' books were not only seen as impediments to tourists' freedom, however. As Murray writes in his handbook, "At Chamouny and elsewhere, the travellers' books at the inns are great sources of amusement; often containing, in the remarks of preceding travellers, useful information" (Murray [1838] 1970, 291). Mixing the useful with the agreeable, these books could provide advice as well as gossip and entertainment. The latter was particularly appreciated when guests were forced to stay indoors, as Dorothy Wordsworth, on tour in Chamonix with her sister-in-law and poet brother in September 1820, comments in her journal

The Album of the Union Inn could hardly be read through in a whole week of bad weather. The names of many of our Friends and acquaintances were discovered; and quotations from my Brother's poems – "Matthew" and "Yarrow Visited" with "Sad Stuff!" affixed to the latter, by way of comment, in another handwriting. Some spirited pencil sketches in the same book. (Wordsworth 1995, 287)

The fact that the album at the Hôtel de l'Union required an entire week to read through suggests that it did not simply obey the legal format imposed during the French Revolution, but also contained comments, poems, and sketches. The passage serves as a reminder that visitors' book culture included acts of reading, writing, even drawing, that it was interactive, and most significantly perhaps, that it helped connect tourists with other tourists and with acquaintances back home. This networked list of names, a sort of improvised "who's who", contributed to tourists' sense of class distinction.

Albert Smith discusses visitors' book practices, and notably their association with social class, in "Loose Leaves from the Travellers [*sic*] Album at Chamonix," a satirical essay published in 1841 that uses the conceit of bad weather to transcribe several examples of album verse and commentary. Housebound for three days at the Hôtel de Londres with only three books on hand (Ebel's and Murray's guides, and one of Genevan travel writer Rodolph Töpffer's comic tour accounts), he is forced like Dorothy Wordsworth to dip into the *livre des voyageurs*, significantly found on one of the tables in the dining room rather than being well guarded at the reception. Even though Smith transcribes entries in both English and French, he affirms that visitors' book culture is mainly British, and arises not only from the modern need to assert oneself, but also from the desire to be identified with the upper classes

The majority of [the entries] it will be seen are in English as these kinds of effusions generally are, probably resulting from a vanity of the same impulse which prompts us to write our names on Memnon's nose or cut our initials on the picture frames at Hampton Court. (Smith 1841, 577)

The word "effusion", used in sentimental culture to qualify an outburst of feeling, indicates that Victorians saw visitor book entries as an expressive genre. At the same time, the inscriptions given as examples are socially transgressive, stem from "vanity", and are the result of class envy ("Hampton Court" standing for the aristocracy), inviting readers' moral censure.

In his selection of extracts, Smith privileges those entries that draw ironic responses from other tourists because they are too effusive or simply poorly written, revealing their authors' lack of social breeding. Playing on the new class consciousness triggered by mass tourism that his shows would later encourage, Smith reproduces the ideology of Britain's elites who viewed vanity, or too much self-assertion, as vulgar, notably citing inscriptions that contain humorous spelling mistakes, make sexual puns, or in the example below, show off:

Aug. 25, 1824. Mr. and Mrs. John Robinson, and Mr. John Robinson Jr. went to the Mer de Glace to-day, and returned back again in safety from the interesting, yet thrillingly perilous excursion.

[added in pencil] You don't say so! What a proud day for England! (Smith 1841, 579)

Perceiving in the quotation a certain John Bullism that he associates with the new "cockney" class of tourists to which Smith himself belonged (McNee 2015, 168–169),

the author of the pencilled comment leaves a sarcastic response that is similar to the classist and anti-touristic “policing” that Alan McNee has also identified in British albums after 1870 (McNee 2020, 4). As the title of Smith’s essay suggests, visitor books enabled Victorian guests to reprimand those who behaved in too “loose” or individualistic a fashion by policing their entries, in turn helping maintain social order.

One of the most common ways in which “cockney” tourists betrayed their class origins was by failing to apprehend the sublime correctly. William Webb, who lived on the Continent between 1822 and 1823, exemplifies the close relation between tourism, class, and aesthetics in a long passage describing Chamonix. The author contrasts his own experience of the sublime, which he attributes to his class distinction, with the impoverished responses of middle-class tourists who are unable to appreciate the Alps’ grandeur due to the fact that modern tourism is too organised

Hence with the hasty – who are the ordinary class of – visitants, the effect that is induced is disappointment and dissatisfaction. They arrive in the evening, – are agog for Montanvert in the morning, and are forthwith back at Geneva, – treating the awfulness of nature as they might a public gallery of pictures that is open from twelve till three; – and as they might, during the prescribed lounge in such a place, peer through the gallery catalogue – converted by them into a tube, – and levelled at some of the crack paintings. Just in the same way do they give a cursory view to this and the other object which their guide-book had previously instructed them to look out for, – get fatigued through the toil of the ascent, and mortified from its being so ill rewarded; – and mortification overcoming their languor, they effuse their bile in the Album, for whose redundancy of bald nonsense, – beyond that of all other similar repositories in the world – I can thus distinctly account. (Webb 1827, 321–322)

What Ann Colley influentially calls the “sinking” of the sublime,¹⁰ in other words its transformation from an exclusive to a commonplace experience, is shown here to be as much the product of orderliness as of ordinariness. By hurrying these *déclassé* tourists through Chamonix valley, treating the view as a commodity, and prescribing a programmed aesthetic response through the mediation of guidebooks, organised tourism diminishes visitors’ affective relation to the alpine landscape. The gallery, with its fixed hours of operation, “prescribed” lounge, and pre-selected paintings notably regulates their behaviour, in turn provoking feelings of “disappointment and dissatisfaction” that lead to overly sentimental or else irreverent comments and verse, what Webb calls a “redundance of bald nonsense”, which, according to the author, profane the mountains’ sacredness.

Ordering the sublime can thus mean trying to make it accessible to the largest possible number of tourists, as we saw in the previous section, but also policing it in visitors’ books to maintain its sense of sacredness and to censor entries deemed too socially disruptive. Commenting specifically on the visitors’ book at the Hôtel de l’Union, Webb writes

Its Travellers’ book consists of all sorts of names, and is a receptacle of all descriptions of scribble: it is a good counterpart to an Album which is kept on Montanvert. Both books superabound in an accumulation and flood of daily wretched trash beyond that of any other Album, which it has been my lot to dip into. (Webb 1827, 317)

The passage is instructive on several counts. First, it confirms that Chamonix’s hotel registers were less regulated under Sardinian rule than after the French annexation in 1860, as Percy Shelley’s torn page from the Hôtel de Londres also attests. Second, it establishes an equivalence between a hotel register, with its lined, pre-formatted pages, and a blank-page album, indicating that tourists did not necessarily differentiate one from the other.

Third, by comparing them, it indicates that Chamonix's visitor's books were part of a network linking hotels and tourist attractions throughout the valley. His reference to "daily wretched trash", finally, again points to the perceived sacrilege of "cockney" tourists' comments, but might also be a more direct condemnation of Shelley's by-then well publicised avowal of atheism in Chamonix's visitors' books (de Beer 1958).

In the remaining space, I shall look more closely at the content of the *Montanvert* and *Flégère* albums in order to understand better how visitors' books helped order tourists' experience of Chamonix and the alpine sublime. The two large blank-page, leather-bound books each contain several thousand names, as well as hundreds of comments, poems, sketches, and doodles. Their content is very similar to that found in visitors' books at the Rigi Kulm hotel in Switzerland, as Jérémie Magnin shows in this journal issue, as well as on Mount Snowdon in Wales (Singer 2016), indicating that visitors' book practices transcended national borders, depending instead on a site's touristic function. Because Chamonix was such a popular destination, the books feature many notable figures, among them the writers Harriet Beecher Stowe (*Flégère*, 5 July 1853), Dr. Roget (*Flégère*, 21 August 1844), and John Ruskin (*Flégère*, 15 May 1849), the scientists William Buckland and Michael Faraday (*Flégère*, 14 July 1835), the artist Gustave Doré (*Flégère*, 12 August 1851), and many aristocrats. More surprising is the mixed social origin of the entries, the books representing a levelling and cosmopolitan cross-section of society. Local hunters, shepherds, guides, and hotel workers feature alongside Russian princes, English merchants and clergymen, German theology students, Americans on the Grand Tour, women travelling alone or in groups, and whole families, including a boy as young as five and a family of thirteen children. This potentially unruly mix of nationality, class, gender and age required norms of inscription, but also a fair amount of (self)-policing, most tourists simply imitating the inscription format of previous entries.

Although one finds some remarkably idiosyncratic texts and images, the vast majority of visitors only signed their names, as we saw earlier. Indeed, a sketch showing a name inscribed on a visitor card (*Montanvert*, 6 July 1863) nicely illustrates the fact that the main purpose of these albums was simply to mark one's passage. The roughly five percent of comments, poems, and images cover a variety of themes. Most simply describe the weather, itinerary, or view. Some visitors are interested in following ascents of Mont Blanc with the aid of a telescope. Others dutifully quote Milton or the Romantic poets, including Lord Byron's lines from *Manfred* (1817) on the "Monarch of the mountains" (*Flégère*, 24 July 1834, 21 July 1853; *Montanvert*, 19 July 1860) that Murray popularises in his guide (Murray [1838] 1970, 295) and that both Albert Smith (1848, 330) and Samuel Butler (1966, 45) lampoon. Events such as the 1848 Revolution, Emperor Napoleon III's visit or the American Civil War are commented on (*Flégère*, May 1849; *Montanvert*, 11 September 1860; 4 August 1862). One also finds more transgressive remarks, including interjections on the beer or the fair sex, or else scatological jokes, showing the same "cheerfully robust" attitude as in Britain (McNee 2020, 6). The majority of the images conventionally depict mules and chamois in various poses, as well as tourists walking, climbing, even flying, but there are also portraits, physiognomic sketches, and album verse in several languages.

Different examples of the policing described above include warnings that a particular ascent is too difficult for ladies (*Montanvert*, 11 August 1856), as well as admonishments against visitors who write bad verse (*Montanvert*, 11 July 1860), make spelling mistakes

(*Flégère*, 11 September 1843) or devote too much space to their exploits (*Montanvert*, 25 August 1864). When one group of English tourists gives their walking times, for instance, another visitor reprimands them; “An absurd piece of boasting” (*Flégère*, 5 July 1852). Comments criticising the stereotyped character of each nation abound. An entry in pseudo-Chinese, for example, draws the following response: “Only a Frenchman can write such a thing” (*Flégère*, 24 July 1852). The question of what constitutes appropriate content arises so often, in fact, that it may be seen as one of the running motifs in these books together with descriptions of the weather and the view. While a number of visitors condemn the entries as unimaginative, silly, or simply trash (*Flégère*, 29 August 1833; 23 July 1834; 3 September 1837), at least one tourist defends their sentimental value (*Flégère*, 24 July 1834).

Although organised tourism was seen as diminishing the quality of visitors’ responses to the surrounding landscape, a number of entries suggest that they were still capable of experiencing strong affects in the Alps. We know thanks to the Shelley controversy that many of the comments in the earlier albums were effusions in praise of the divine in nature (Southey 1817, 26 June). These comments persist in later years: I counted twenty-four prose and verse passages celebrating the panorama of Mont Blanc in the *Flégère* book between 1832 and 1834, for example, including four religious-themed and three satirical entries. Hansen remarks that tourists associated the *Flégère*, marked with a cross, with the Restoration’s re-sacralisation of mountains (Hansen 2013, 143–145), perhaps explaining why one finds more examples of the religious sublime in that album than in the one from the *Montanvert*. The majority of reactions to the view are generally brief, including a French student’s curt but effusive “Splendide!” (*Montanvert*, 21 September 1863) and a Briton’s exclamation on discovering the Mont Blanc: “It beats the great Exhibition!!!!!!!!!!!!” (*Flégère*, 30 June 1852). Although the only way he can express his sense of awe is by comparing the scene to an urban exhibit, reminding us that tourism had transformed the Alps into a cultural spectacle for mass consumption, his comment, and especially the exclamation marks that follow, reveal that mountains continued to exert their power on their viewers. As Colley (2010, 3) acknowledges, the Romantic sublime in the second half of the century “was still very much a factor to reckon with”.

Many writers have also noted how authentic feeling remained possible despite tourism’s ordering and commoditising of experience. An early visitor, the clergyman Thomas Raffles, writes, for example, that notwithstanding his guide, he was still overwhelmed by the wildness and danger at *Montanvert* (Raffles 1817, 201). In his 1838 *Handbook*, John Murray likewise remarks that “Unlike other places merely fashionable, and crowded by idlers, no extent of participation can lessen the sublime emotions and impressions made by the scenery of the vale of Chamouny” (Murray 1838 [1970], 292). And as late as 1880, the usually irreverent Mark Twain is deeply moved by the sight of the moonlit Mont Blanc, one of the rare moments of solemnity in his otherwise humorous account (Twain 2003, 254). Even Samuel Butler’s often cited passage in *The Way of All Flesh* (1903), in which the narrator satirises George Pontifex’s “fit of conventional ecstasy” before Mont Blanc, admits that the feelings expressed in his album verse were “suitable to the day” if not “to the scene” (1966, 45–46). Hansen (2013, 179) calls this residual experience of sublimity “the production of subjectivity amid an expansion of consumption and the commodification of things”. It reminds us that no matter how impersonal and reified

the processes of tourism might appear to us today, or how generic and commonplace the content of visitors' books, a strictly quantitative approach that minimises these books' expressive content misrepresents the experience of travel. If nineteenth-century tourism in Chamonix as elsewhere, was less about freedom than control, its effort to order and stabilise the experience of travel, notably by policing tourists' movements and their commentaries in visitors' books, never could fully contain travellers' emotions. Even a few hurriedly penned-in lines on the weather and itinerary suffice to express the thrill felt by visitors experiencing the Mer de glace or the Flégère. Chamonix's visitors' books and registers survive as testaments to their excitement.

Notes

1. I have adopted the spelling most commonly used in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British-language publications, as well in the visitor book itself. French publications also used the alternate spelling, 'Montenvers', which has since become standard.
2. "Meys Guillaume de Bruxelles est monté ce matin par un temps magnifique comme ce qui est expliqué plus haut, et reparti pour le jardin. 3 heures pour le retour du jardin jusqu'au Mont Brévent" (my translation).
3. Pages with a single, red-ink column on the left-hand side were inserted after 1856 for visitors to write the date, and after 1858 with a second column added on the right side, pointing to a shift away from albums to registers, and indicating the effort to order entries. An earlier album had been placed in the Temple de la nature, a one-room octagonal pavilion that currently stands between the two historic hotels on the Montanvert. It was notably meant to discourage visitors from writing on the building's walls and furniture (Vincent 2020; Hansen 2013, 133).
4. The Montanvert visitor book sample that I use here and below runs from 12 July, when the first entries become legible, to 12 August 1854. In the Flégère album, I counted 58 comments out of 840 entries in 1852, a ratio of 7%.
5. "Meys Guillaume de Bruxelles après avoir visité Chamonix le Montanvert la Mer de Glace et le Jardin a visité la Flégère le 24 Juillet 1854" (my translation).
6. The page was removed by John Mitford in 1819, then acquired by Richard Monkton Milnes, first Lord Houghton, who bound it into a copy of *The Revolt of Islam*. This was inherited by Mary Crewe-Milnes (Roxburghe), who bequeathed it to Trinity College Library in 2015.
7. The order in which Mont Blanc was ascended notably obsessed climbers, an absurdity that Mark Twain satirises when he and Mr. Harris visit the Bureau des guides and see the record book, number 685 still fresh on the page (2003, 255–56).
8. A comparison of all the names entered during the week of 24 and 30 June 1854 (the only period all three coincide chronologically) in the *Registre*, the *Montanvert* and the *Flégère* albums indicates that the data in the former concerning visitors is both inaccurate and incomplete. Of 322 inscriptions in the three books during that six-day period, only three names appear in all three. Moreover, the names in the *Register* are misspelled phonetically, and the nationality is often incorrectly identified: Americans are labelled as English, French as Swiss, and so on. These findings reveal that the clerk only spoke French, that many tourists no longer were hiring guides, and, most surprisingly perhaps, that visitors' books can sometimes be more reliable sources than official registers.
9. In 1860, British climber Alfred Wills, his guide Auguste Balmat, and French painter Gabriel Loppé appealed to the new French prefect, who altered some of the laws allocating guides (Mitchell 2018, 40–41).
10. Colley argues that the sublime sinks under weight of consumerism, sportsmanship, ambition, nationalism, but also plain familiarity. She bases her study on published travel narratives, scrapbooks, travel diaries, and letters, but not visitors' books.

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