

FEBRUARY 19, 2021 BY ADMIN  
 Livre d'or de la Flégère



M<sup>r</sup> Raymond de Mestran de M<sup>r</sup> Dicit de Clement Gerard. France  
 Le 8 ybr 1834

J. McHenry Boyd & party - Sept 9<sup>th</sup> 1834 - United States, of America

M<sup>r</sup> Edw<sup>d</sup> Egerton - Auckl<sup>d</sup>, Sept. 10 - 1834

Capt. Dillon N. Navy

A. C. Galus accompagné de M<sup>r</sup> Lambert & M<sup>r</sup> Lamer de la Compagnie  
 de M<sup>r</sup> de Montalut de Chabert, de Siron, de Breuer de la  
 Vase de Cassinot Henry. par une route le 11 ybr 1834 par un  
 temps superbe & on en fait à dire :

Cooke John Thomas  
 William Loder (M<sup>r</sup> Loder)  
 George Blackwell

Joseph Chara  
 Déclaration par  
 oissidargent  
 L'union de  
 Maite Chara

Sept 10<sup>th</sup>  
 1834

**Contributor:** Patrick Vincent

**Location:** Musée Alpin, Chamonix

**Description:** The Livre d'or de La Flégère, a 635-page, folio-sized, leather-bound book held at the Musée Alpin in Chamonix, is one of the few extant alpine visitor books from the first half of the nineteenth century, and the only one to cover such a wide time span. It contains over fifteen thousand names, comments in various languages, and roughly a hundred and fifty poems, sketches, and doodles, offering us rare insight into the cultural practices of European Romantic travel as well as the concomitant commoditising of the Alps. Belonging to what historian Kevin James has described as 'an experimental space of self-exposure' with its well-established dramaturgy, visitor books such as this one played a central role in disseminating and democratizing the Romantic Sublime.



Reaching the Croix de La Flégère in 1832 took approximately two and a half hours, although, then as now, some visitors boasted of being able to do it in half that time. Close to the cross was a 'buvette' run by the local shepherd, Samuel Couttet, who offered refreshments as well as chamois blankets and shelter for those wishing to stay overnight for the sunrise. John Murray's *Handbook for Travellers in Switzerland* (1838) describes it in the following manner:

"*The Flégère*—This point of view of Mont Blanc is that which is most generally attained by ladies, because it may be accomplished on mules the whole way, and it is one of the finest in the valley [...] 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 specifies that 'sight-seeing is turned to good account [...] in Chamouny'. The Romantic fashion for the sublime fed the local inn-keepers, hotel staff, guides, and mule-drivers, a surprising number of whom signed their names in the book, sometimes in the local patois. It also provided work to artists, including Romantic illustrator Samuel Birmann; Robert Burford, whose 'Description of a view of Mont Blanc', taken a few hundred meters above the cross, was exhibited at Leicester Square Panorama in 1835, drawing even more tourists to the viewing point; and, in the early 1850s, Albert Smith, the celebrated creator of 'Mont Blanc', which drew a million spectators to Egyptian Hall. That La Flégère had become a commercial spectacle by 1851 is made clear in an entry stating that 'It beats the great exhibition!!!!'

There are three inscriptions by Smith in the album, one of them thickly circled, as well as two accounts of his first ascent of the mountain as viewed from La Flégère; a reminder of Smith's fame and close association with Chamonix. Other celebrities who entered their names include Ruskin in 1849 and Tennyson in 1851, scientists William Buckland and Michael Faraday (splendidly illustrated riding up in his top hat with his wife in amazon ahead of him), the artists Albanis Beaumont and Gustave Doré, as well as many aristocrats, among them the Russian General Léon Narishkin, who was wounded at Borodino, and the Prince de Ligne, followed the next day by his valet.

Like this valet, ordinary tourists give the Flégère book its real interest, helping us better understand the Alps' appeal to both genders and to different age groups, social classes, and nationalities. In addition to all those working in the tourist industry, we find the names of hunters who came up in winter, shepherds, Oxbridge men returning from the Grand Tour, German students on their *Wanderjahr*, members of the clergy, military officers, women travelling alone or in groups, and especially families, including a boy as young as five and a family of thirteen children. While the first entry is written in Spanish, French, and Italian, reminding us that Chamonix belonged to Kingdom of Sardinia until 1860, the vast majority of visitors hailed from Britain. In the first three years, 253 people identify themselves as English, Irish and Scottish, twice as many as French visitors, four times more than Swiss and Germans, and eight times more than Americans. The number of Britons increased each year.

Most visitors simply signed their names or left neutral comments on the weather, a clear view of Mont Blanc being their primary motive for climbing up to La Flégère. Some also responded to the awe-inspiring sight by leaving a few lines by Milton, Byron, Chateaubriand, or Lamartine. Far more wished to be poetasters in their own right, composing album verse that almost invariably pays homage to God. This of course drew responses both sardonic or satirical, including one praising the 'vue sublimesse / d'une très grande beautesse'. A few wished to safely observe ascents to the famed summit across the valley, including that by Henriette d'Angeville in 1838. But mountains were not the only thing on tourists' mind. We find spirited entries in praise of the beer, for instance, as well as saucy comments on the good looks of English ladies or Swiss girls, including the unseemly pairing of '22 mulets et des anglaises magnifiques'. Others preferred to leave a political message, allowing us to follow the period's long succession of revolutions and restorations, including a lampoon of Louis Philippe in 1831, a celebration of the French republic in 1848, an attack on Napoleon III in 1851, and the interjection 'Viva Espana' in 1855, the year of Spain's failed Constitution.

The sixty or so illustrations are almost as interesting as the text. A majority of these represent mules in various poses, including tourists holding to mule tails for their dear life, and mules defecating. There are also pictures of dogs in heat and chamois doing all sorts of things, as well as of people walking, climbing, even flying. There are portraits of Lamartine and Chateaubriand, physiognomic sketches of various national traits, and all sorts of other idiosyncratic doodles. Many resemble the early comic strips of the Genevan artist Rodolphe Töpffer, himself an avid walker who knew Chamonix well, suggesting that visitor books may be one possible origin of the cartoon.

In the above image, we discover two fashionable couples framed by a picturesque *coulisse* of pines. The women wear 1830s-style bonnets, tight bodices, and ankle length carriage gowns with gigot sleeves. The men are dressed in wool coats and what looks like French hunting or sailor caps. Across the valley are the imposing silhouettes of the Aiguilles du Grépon and du Midi. To our left and out of sight, is the famed Mer de glace. To the right, also out of our field of vision, is Mont Blanc. Three of the figures are admiring Byron's 'Monarch of the mountains', one of them with the aid of a telescope, whereas the fourth is looking toward us, as if posing for a selfie. The sketch is signed 'G.S.' and placed over a separate inscription by a tourist from Clermont-Ferrand dated 8 September 1834. On the same page are entries by a party from the United States, two visitors from Britain, another French group, and four more English tourists accompanied by a local guide. The weather that day, according to one inscription, is 'superb', with 'perfect' visibility.

The image perfectly illustrates the rapid democratization of the Romantic Sublime during the first half of the nineteenth century, when, as historian Claire-Eliane Engel puts it, the Alps were brought down to Earth. The solitary, reflective male figure in Caspar David Friedrich's iconic 'Wanderer above the Sea of Fog', painted only sixteen years beforehand, is replaced by these four tourists, suggesting that the Romantic Sublime could also be a collective experience. If the grinning woman turned toward her companions exposes Friedrich's Romantic *mise en scène*, the many poems and comments in the visitor book praising Mont Blanc's divine glory also remind us that most visitors during the first half of the nineteenth century continued to associate the natural sublime with Christian faith, not with Percy Bysshe Shelley's 'awful doubt'.

**Date:** 1831 to 1855

**Media:** photograph of entries dated 8 September 1834 in the *Livre d'or des visiteurs à la Croix de la Flégère*. Photo courtesy of the Musée Alpin

**Media rights:** Musée Alpin, Chamonix

**Object type:** visitor book

**Format:** thick leather-bound album with manuscript pages, Height: 42.5 cm; Width : 31 cm .

**Language:** French, English, German, Italian, Russian, etc.

**Related objects:** Le Temple de la Nature

**Catalogue number:** 2015.0.633

## **References**

Engel, Claire Eliane. *La littérature alpestre en France et en Angleterre aux XVIIIe et XIXe siècle*. Chambéry, 1930.

James, Kevin. ' "[A] British Social Institution": The Visitors' Book and Hotel Culture in Victorian Britain and Ireland'. *Journeys: The International Journal of Travel Writing*. 13, no. 1 (2012): 42-69.