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## THE NATURE GUIDES OF CHAMONIX

Catherine Morgan-Proux

Ted T. Cable

*“I cannot speak in too high terms about Adophe Balmat. He is at once a man who is gifted with the power of making everything as agreeable as possible to the traveler and never loses an opportunity of saying or doing the right thing in the right place and at the right time”* July 30, 1881 Mr. Eaton Fanning from London.

### Introduction

The above quote was written by a customer of mountain guide Adophe Balmat. It is found in Balmat’s journal which he used to collect endorsements from clients. In those days, upon completion of each walk or excursion, customers would be asked to write testimonials in a guide’s journal. This written evidence of the guide’s skills could then be shown to encourage potential customers and functioned as a *Trip Advisor* from the 1800s. **[photo 1 near here]**

Twenty-six such journals belonging to guides are housed in the county archives in Annecy, France and in the Alpine Museum in Chamonix at the base of Mont Blanc in the French Alps. They are unpublished and date from 1809 to 1913. Their owners’ names are inscribed on the aged leather covers. Today, these precious artifacts shed light on the history of nature guiding and give clues to how these early nature guides were pioneering the interpretive profession.

We accessed these journals from the archives and then read and translated all the entries to answer the key question: Were these tour guides acting as professional interpreters or merely leading tourists up the mountain?

### Were Guides Functioning as Interpreters?

*“Interpreters lead, enable, and encourage. Interpreters educate. Interpreters entertain. Interpreters inform. But most of all, interpreters enrich recreational experiences ...”* (Beck, Cable & Knudson, 2018)

With these characteristics of interpretation in mind, the notebooks contain many comments indicating that the guides did indeed interpret while they guided their guests along the trails.

Most evidently, they were imparting knowledge. A visitor in Adophe Balmat’s journal refers in 1873 to his *“perfect knowledge of the mountain.”* In Alexis Devousassoud’s journal, his intelligence is mentioned in four consecutive entries!

Other customer comments indicating that they learned from the guide include a visitor comments about guide Jean Mugnier in 1821 saying he had *“A particular knowledge of the land we are travelling through”* and a comment in 1855 from a Mr. Coleman from London who wrote, *“Those who are fortunate to engage him will find him a most instructive companion”* Of Julien

Charlet on 16 September 1835 a client wrote of his *“willingness to reply to all our questions.”* These are but a few of the comments specifically addressing learning that occurred on the hikes.

Another clue that these excursions were educational was found in Delphin Coutter’s notebook from 1871 wherein there are 16 pages of what one can see from various viewpoints, including natural landmarks with precise heights of peaks, and “curiosités” such as castles, monuments, towers, and other heritage sites. Also, he noted the population of France, its agricultural production, major cities, rivers, the number of parliamentarians. Undoubtedly, this information was recorded to share with his clients while out on the trail.

Similarly, Delphin Couttet’s journal contains two French/English glossaries which give a fascinating insight into the kind of conversations that might have taken place with visitors. For example, under “A” his English vocabulary words include “ambassador,” “amaze” “astonishment” and even “Africa.”

Other visitors commented about the enjoyment provided by these guides. Journal entries such as *“an honest and good fellow, particularly attentive, full of anecdotes ...”* from 14 September 1823 and *“the pleasure of the ... excursions was much increased by the interesting information from his great experience among the mountains...”* from 20 July 1826 indicate enjoyable presentations were delivered by the guides. Other comments describe guides as having “social qualities” and able to hold “shrewd conversation.”

Guides also created conditions in which visitors could enjoy themselves. The Count and Countess Esterheray say of Alfred Balmart on 5 May 1909: *“He is a very good cook, is always in a good mood and has tremendous enthusiasm.”*

These guides also applied what would become Tilden’s first principle of interpretation by making special efforts to relate to their audiences and their “first interests” thereby enriching visitor experiences. Typically, visitors were middle or upper class and they were mainly British; but some were Americans, French or from the neighboring European countries. Travel to Chamonix had been made appealing by the romantic poets and artists. Many tourists paid tribute to the guide’s ability to show them the sublime views that drew them to the Alps. A William Camfed wrote of Jean Mugnier on 27 July 1841, *“I believe he turned considerably out of his direction in order to show me the two magnificent cascades of Barberine.”*

Like any good interpreter, guides adjusted to the visitors’ abilities (e.g., Francois Devousassoud *“could go at any pace”*) and preexisting knowledge (e.g., Delphin Couttet compared the heights of the visible mountains with Mount Everest and explained the word Himalayas means *“place of snow”*). Visitors often referred to the guide’s ability to adapt to women, by being particularly courteous, especially with women travelling by themselves. One entry reads, *“I can recommend him to ladies who are alone, because being alone myself, it is thanks to his gentleness that I was able to this hike.”* -- Jeanne Claibois from Paris, writing about Alfred Balmart on 31 July 1911.  
**[photo 2 near here]**

The performance of the guides built loyalty and even affection among clients. Guides and visitors clearly made personal connections. The intense experience of exploring the mountains

together forged memories, even friendships. “*I shall always cherish my pleasant recollection of my acquaintance with him*” says T.H. Tolfane of Jean Mugnier in April 1841. Fragments of a letter from Harriet Frances Tyndale from 3 July 1848 tucked into to Julien Charlet’s journal says, - “*...you sent me via my sister some lovely dried flowers. I assure you I shall keep them for a long time and with care to remember you by. ... I would very much like to see you again and your beautiful country, your beautiful mountains and valleys...*”

The following entry gives testament to the educational, enjoyable, and enriching attributes of interpretation demonstrated by Chamonix guides. **[photo 3 near here]**

“*Jean Edouard Devouassoud acted as guide to myself and my brother yesterday at Chamonix. We have found him all that could be desired. He is remarkably intelligent and well informed, and is certainly trustworthy and conscientious. [...] If we return to Chamonix we shall certainly try to get him again as our experience with him has been a most pleasant one.*” - Mr. W. James, 30 June 1860.

### **Were the Guides Professionals?**

Were these guides acting as *professional* guides rather than merely freelancing hunters or herdsmen? Indeed, historians in France (e.g., Chaubet, 1996) have established that these guides were part of a formal defined profession because of documents such as the professional charter, council reports, and other official governmental papers.

At least by 1821 there is no question that these guides were professional in every sense of the word. “*La Compagnie des Guides de Chamonix,*” the first of its type in the world, was established in 1821 in response to the growing numbers of visitors. Its charter contained all the hallmarks of a profession: rules, regulations, standards of conduct with the tourists, required knowledge about botany and geology, character references from local teachers and police, and even a system of insurance in the event of an on-the-job accident. They developed and advertised an array of specific types of hikes, including short 20-minute “promenades.” **[photo 4 near here]** It seems highly unlikely that people would pay for guides on the short 20-minute walk to merely walk them from point A to B without insightful communications along the way.

The *Companie des guides de Chamonix* became a model for other guiding companies in northern Italy and Switzerland, and even North America. In the early 1900s, the work of these professional Swiss guides was witnessed by philanthropist Charles Goethe who financed a replication of their work in California and played a role in getting nature interpretation into the U.S. National Parks. In the 1860s, Chamonix guides went to work in the Banff area of the Canadian Rockies. They were recruited because the growth of Canadian tourism created a need for qualified mountain guides. The Swiss chalets built for their families are a reminder today of this historical legacy. The *Companie des guides de Chamonix* still exists today with over 200 professional mountain guides.

### **Conclusion**

Clearly, the Chamonix guides were not merely leading people up the mountain or strolling along with them in the valley. Like Harriet’s letter above, these notebooks are both secretive and

revealing. Stories of inspiration, learning, enrichment and friendship fire our imaginations. The Chamonix notebooks contain evidence that these guides were pioneering interpretation as we know it today. The evidence is compelling and important in teaching us about the origins of the profession.

### **Literature Cited**

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