



The Cockney Who Sold the Alps: Albert Smith and the Ascent of Mont Blanc

Alan McNee

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Albert Smith is one of the most famous Victorians of whom you've probably never heard. During his lifetime, he was a household name, thrilling audiences with his Ascent of Mont Blanc show at London's Egyptian Hall. An inveterate showman, Smith was also a doctor, journalist, raconteur, novelist, travel writer, and playwright. His many talents were outstripped only by his boundless self-belief and huge personality. Even Queen Victoria described him in her journal as "inimitable", an epithet Smith's contemporary Charles Dickens liked to reserve for himself. Although Smith died aged only 43, he managed to pack much incident into his short life. He was robbed by highwaymen in Italy, narrowly escaped death in a hot air ballooning accident, and dodged arrest in Paris during the June Days Uprising of 1848. He also got caught up in the row over Dickens's affair with Ellen Ternan. While his bumptiousness made Smith a divisive figure, many saw in him the Victorian ideal of the self-made man: energetic, imaginative, and ready to seize any new opportunity. As Alan McNee explains in this lively biography, it was his intrepid ascent of Mont Blanc in 1851 that propelled Smith to stardom. His subsequent show inspired 'Mont Blanc mania', encouraging participation in mountaineering as a popular pursuit. The Cockney Who Sold the Alps is a story of ambition, spectacle, and the fleeting nature of celebrity.

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