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Once More to the Mountain

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Rosalind H. Williams, Charles W. McFarland

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ESSAY

Once More to the Mountain

**ROSALIND H. WILLIAMS and
CHARLES W. MCFARLAND**

*Home is where one starts from. As we grow older
The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated
Of dead and living...
There is a time for the evening under starlight,
A time for the evening under lamplight
(The evening with the photograph album).*

— T. S. Eliot¹

There were frequent showers on the train ride from Zürich Airport to Interlaken, but the sky began to clear as my brother and I approached our destination on the track running along the south shore of Lake Thun. The clouds lifted; a rainbow appeared on the other side of the lake; and then, astonishingly, one end of the arc seemed to leap across the water to our railway car, as if seeking us out. My brother and I looked at each other, dumbfounded. It was too maudlin, too corny for words, but there it was, and we were thinking the same thing: “It’s Mom and Dad!”

Chuck and I had last been in the Bernese Alps on a family vacation in 1959. We were returning in July 2010 in part as an homage to our now-deceased parents, and in part to relive an experience that had been among the most enjoyable and memorable of our lives. It was altogether a personal journey, not a business trip. Yet from the moment it began, I could not avoid some professional musings. What historian of technology could, when modern travel is a vast network of large technological systems? The contrast between those of 1959 and those of today struck me even before

Rosalind Williams is the Bert Dibner Professor of the History of Science and Technology in the Program in Science, Technology, and Society at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She served as president of the Society for the History of Technology from 2005–07. Charles McFarland, after a career in industrial chemical research (most recently with Atotech USA Inc.), now devotes more time to long-distance hiking (Appalachian Trail) and biking (Potomac Heritage Trail, Natchez Trace Parkway).

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1. T. S. Eliot, “East Coker,” stanza 5, in *Four Quartets* (1943).

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leaving Logan Airport in Boston. As the Swissair staff struggled to wedge everyone on the overbooked flight, a frustrated desk clerk muttered, “The loaves and the fishes are nothing compared to this.” I inevitably recalled the smaller, calmer Logan Airport of 1959: no commercial jetliners, true, but also no security checks or jostling for overhead bins.

All during our trip, Chuck and I kept comparing and contrasting technologies then and now. As our journey progressed, we found ourselves also thinking about other less visible stories of technological change, those connected with the larger social, political, and economic history of the cold war—with the context, to use the handy professional term. More layers of historical thinking were added as we contemplated the various ways humans, intentionally or otherwise, have altered even the Alps. Most of all, we became conscious of the connections between lifetime and historical time. Fiftieth anniversaries (fifty-first, in our case: close enough) have emotional and intellectual weight because they mark the threshold where individual memory begins to be transformed into collective memory. When fifty years have passed since an event—whether as personal as marriage, or as public as the end of a war—we humans know the odds are overwhelming that we will not be around for another half century. We think about how events of our lives might be reshaped into shared and therefore more enduring meaning. We try to make connections between personal and historical experience.

* * *

The story begins with a well-known, and oft-lamented, chapter in American industrial history: the beginning of the decline of American manufacturing. Our father was a General Electric engineer, and in 1956 the Industry Control department in which he worked had been moved from Schenectady, New York, to Salem, a small town in southwest Virginia near Roanoke. In retrospect we can now see that our family was caught up in the great diaspora of facilities and personnel to areas offering cheaper, non-unionized labor. Today, this is being done globally; at that time, “outsourcing” seemed possible within the United States.

Especially in those early years in Virginia, as Yankees we often had the sense of being strangers in a strange land. My brother and I have not forgotten the shock of stepping off the Norfolk and Western train and entering the Roanoke terminal in 1956 to see the rest room signs prominently labeled Colored and White. Chuck pointed to them, exclaiming, “Look at that!” Our mother later confessed that she was instinctively embarrassed by his outburst, while also sharing his dismay at this public reminder of racial segregation.

Nevertheless, the move had some real advantages, especially for our parents. The weather was milder. Our father enjoyed the small-town friendliness of Salem, and our mother was able to teach math in a local community

college without a master's degree. The Salem schools remained segregated during our years in them, as the Commonwealth of Virginia defied the 1954 Supreme Court ruling through a strategy of "massive resistance." The schools were not very good, but Chuck and I learned what we could in them and made some close friends.

For our first summer vacation in the South, we took a road trip to the North Carolina mountains and Daytona Beach. After that, we headed elsewhere: to the Colorado Rockies for the second summer (the first time Chuck and I traveled by air), and to New England for the third. In early 1959, considering plans for our fourth summer, Dad learned that the Boston-based Appalachian Mountain Club was arranging a charter flight for members from Boston to Zürich, leaving in early July and returning three weeks later. He had never been out of the country, but his mother's family was from Germany, and as an engineer he admired Swiss and German engineering. Mom had been to Europe in 1939, on a bicycling trip in the British Isles, and in 1954 had visited England and the Continent with her own parents. In both cases, she had crossed the Atlantic on Cunard liners. She liked the idea of introducing the whole family to some of the sights and places that had impressed her, especially in Paris.

So our parents signed up the family for the AMC charter flight. The four of us went to the main post office in Roanoke to get a family passport (all four on the same document). Dad arranged to pick up a VW Microbus in Zürich and mapped a roughly oval route for the three weeks we had at our disposal. The plan was to arrive in Zürich on July 6, drive west to the Bernese Alps, then east to Austria and southern Germany, west again via Metz to Paris, and finally eastward back to Zürich. On July 28 we would be ready to fly back to Boston via London and Shannon Airport in Ireland.

Nowadays a vacation trip to the European heartland for an American family has become routine. It was not so in 1959. For Chuck and me, the trip did much more than lift us out of a small town in southwest Virginia for a few weeks. For him, the trip encouraged a lifetime of hiking and similar outdoors adventures, culminating in his completion of the Appalachian Trail in three summers from 2006 to 2008. For me, it led to an academic career in the cultural history of technology, focused on Europe.

Our trip took place in the brief technological interlude between the age of ocean liners and that of jetliners. We boarded a propeller plane in Roanoke for Boston, and then another propeller plane in Boston for Zürich with a refueling stop in London. We landed at Zürich Airport early on July 6, 1959. Our first evening we dined on cheese fondue and white wine in a small cellar restaurant in the old city of Zürich. A couple of days later in Interlaken, we breakfasted on the hotel patio next to the river Aare that feeds Lake Thun. In the bright morning sunlight we were served café au lait, croissants, and rolls accompanied by handcut butter curls and glass pots of strawberry jam. For us this was not an Old World: it was a wonderful new one.

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Fifty summers rolled by. I found myself once again flying from Boston to Zürich, this time headed for an academic meeting. In the course of the usual pleasantries with a seatmate, I recalled my first flight to Zürich. It turned out that I was chatting with Linda Jean Titus; that she was a long-time friend of Richard Hirsh, also of southwest Virginia (Blacksburg), just finishing his term as treasurer of the Society for the History of Technology; that she had hiked in the Bernese Alps with her family; and that she had written a guidebook titled *Walking Inn to Inn: A Self-Guided Hike in the Swiss Alps*.²

This encounter seemed as providential as the rainbow that would later appear. I bought two copies of Linda's guidebook (both of which she signed "happy hiking!") and gave one to Chuck. We began to think seriously about taking a trip back to the Interlaken area, the first and most memorable part of our 1959 trip. Soon we had blocked out the first week of July 2010 for transatlantic travel and four days of hiking in the Bernese Oberland.

Thanks to his AT experience, Chuck knew all about the logistics of planning hikes. He suggested that we tackle some portion of the Via Alpina: "If there is a European version of the AT," he emailed me, "this is it." He was used to backpacking, but I was not enthusiastic even about inn-to-inn hiking, given that some of the "inns" appeared to be more like shelters. He pointed out that we could do all the hiking we wanted without roughing it if we used the cog railways in the area to come back each night to a hotel in Interlaken. I loved the idea, and not only for the convenience. This would be going beyond the American experience of confronting "the machine in the garden." Here was a chance to experience "the machine in the mountains" (fig. 1).

Both our father and our mother kept diaries on the 1959 vacation, and so we could refresh our memories and confirm that we had stayed in the Hotel Bellevue in Interlaken (fig. 2). Our mother had noted that it was "nice but not fancy." Our father had complained, mildly, about some confusion at checkout time between price per room and price per guest, but otherwise he too seemed pleased with the hotel. These diaries underscore the value of old-fashioned paper archives: the web would never have given us this information. It did, however, prove useful in reconnecting us with the Hotel Bellevue. In a matter of seconds, I was emailing to book rooms for four nights, mentioning our stay there years before. The manager (Jürg Walther) responded:

It has been 9 years now that the family Dübendorfer has bought the Hotel Bellevue. Since then, lots of money and time have been invested to reveal the old charm of the Bellevue. The soft renovations are still

2. Hanover, N.H.: SwissHikes.com, 2007.



FIG. 1 "The machine in the mountains": cows grazing beside the cog railway.
(Source: Photograph by the authors.)



FIG. 2 The Hotel Bellevue. (Source: Photograph by the authors.)

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going on and we have to work hard to keep the charm of the Bellevue alive, but the satisfaction of offering our guests a unique stay at our hotel is worth it all. Working in this historical hotel really means a lot to us.

Historical indeed! Interlaken has been a tourist destination for centuries, especially since the Alps were discovered as a source of “mountain glory” in the 1700s.³ (On Interlaken’s main street one hotel advertises on its façade some of its most illustrious guests, including Lord Byron, who stayed there in the early 1800s.) All through the nineteenth century, Interlaken continued to be a favored site for bourgeois travel. The Bellevue Hotel had been built for this market around the turn of the twentieth century in elegant art nouveau style. The bar was surrounded by handsome woodwork, and equally handsome glass windows overlooked the river Aare. The lobby floor was made of terrazzo, richly decorated with a lotus-flower motif. By the end of the twentieth century, the cumulative effects of two world wars and of cheaper, less elegant styles of travel had closed the bar, shuttered the windows, and emptied the lobby. The Hotel Bellevue was put up for auction. In 2001 it was purchased by Thomas and Regula Dübendorfer, and by the time we planned our trip they had gone far in bringing it back to life.

And so on 4 July 2010, fifty-one years minus two days since the last time we flew to Switzerland together, Chuck and I met at Zürich Airport. We took escalators down to the lower level of the airport where we boarded a train for the two-hour journey to Interlaken. When we disembarked at the railway station there, Chuck, with his usual precise planning about such things, knew exactly which street to take to get us to the Hotel Bellevue. It was back, and so were we.

* * *

The Hotel Bellevue proved an excellent choice. The accommodations were comfortable and the ambience friendly. Its turnaround had been successful in part because the new owners had not tried to replicate a vanished age of bourgeois travel. Instead, they had divided the hotel into two lodging facilities under one roof and management. One part was a hostel, with shared rooms and bathrooms and lower prices; the other, a conventional hotel, was still “nice but not fancy.” Both parts seemed to have plenty of guests—mainly families in the hotel, and mainly young people in the hostel.

Chuck and I must have seemed like ghosts from summers past to the new owners, who were born decades after our 1959 trip. They were unfailingly gracious and appeared interested in our memories. One of the man-

3. Referring to the classic work by Marjorie Nicholson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite*, first published by Cornell University Press in 1959. For a more popular treatment, specifically of the Bernese Alps, by a self-described adventurer, see Richard Bangs, *Quest for the Sublime: Finding Nature’s Secret in Switzerland* (Birmingham, Ala., 2008).

agers gave us a tour of the whole facility, explaining how much work had been done on it and how much remained to be done. It was heartening to see the energy being put into reviving the hotel—but also sobering to see how much time, money, and effort are required to refurbish aging facilities. The glamour of “technology” lies in innovation, not maintenance.

On the night of our arrival, Chuck and I met in the lotus-floored lobby of the Hotel Bellevue—where the wireless internet connection was most robust—to review our hiking plan. We were not trying to retrace exactly our 1959 route. On that trip the four of us had begun our hiking, like countless tourists before us, from Lauterbrunnen, a picturesque village in a glacial valley not far south of Interlaken. Its name means “many fountains,” and the area boasts seventy-two waterfalls, including the iconically wispy and high (almost 300 meters or 984 feet) Staubbach cascade.

On the first day of our 1959 trip, we had walked from Lauterbrunnen to the hill village of Wengen and back down. On the second, we had taken the cog railway from Lauterbrunnen further up to Kleine Scheidegg. There the cog railway splits, one track headed downward to Grindelwald and the other up to the Jungfrauoch, at an altitude of 3,471 m (11,388 ft.), known as the “roof of Europe,” at least for railway travelers. The Jungfrau itself is over 2,000 ft. higher (4,158 m or 13,642 ft.). Chuck and Dad had taken the railway to the Jungfrauoch, where they hired a guide for several hours of hiking on the glacier while Mom and I had stayed in Kleine Scheidegg. After “the boys” returned from this adventure, we all took the cog railroad back to Lauterbrunnen and then Interlaken. The next morning we checked out of the Hotel Bellevue to drive the Microbus toward Austria.

This time we would stay longer, do more, and do it without gender discrimination. Chuck proposed that we walk from Lauterbrunnen to Grindelwald in four days via Wengen, Wengernalp, Kleine Scheidegg, the Eiger Trail, and Alpigen. There are any number of stations on the cog railways where we could embark or disembark, so we could just set out and see how it went (Linda Titus’s book describes these options as “bail-outs”). There are few technological systems more impressive, yet flexible, for the user than the transportation network lacing together the high pastures and even higher peaks of the Bernese Oberland. You do not have to be a historian of technology to admire its design and operation, as it carries so many tourists so efficiently, safely, and pleasantly year after year. Our engineer-father (who later worked to develop car-tracking systems for the Norfolk and Western Railway, headquartered in Roanoke) found Swiss engineering as impressive as he had anticipated, if not more so.

What is most impressive about the mountain railway system is that it is there at all, considering that the “roof of Europe” presents some of the most forbidding territory in the world. Yet within a hundred years or so after the discovery of the Alps as a tourist destination, appreciation of their visible grandeur evolved into determination to conquer their heights. The Jungfrau

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FIG. 3 Cog railway rolling stock at the Eigergletscher station
(Source: Photograph by the authors.)

was first summited in 1811, the Mönch (4,107 m or 13,474 ft.) in 1857, and the Eiger (3,970 m or 13,025 ft.) in 1858, all by small teams of climbers. Soon thereafter, large teams of engineers and laborers began to work on systems that would open up the Alps to non-expert tourists. In 1891 work began on a cog line ascending to Wengen from Lauterbrunnen. In 1896 Swiss engineers began the insanely ambitious project of boring a tunnel through the North Face of the Eiger to the Jungfrauoch. It was completed in 1912, at the cost of the lives of six workers in an 1899 explosion. That same year a restaurant opened at Eigergletscher, at the lower end of the tunnel, so visitors could take lunch with a fine view of the Eiger glacier (fig. 3).

The Swiss persevered in their conquest of the Alps in the service of the tourist trade. In 1908 the first commercial cable car opened at the foot of the Wetterhorn. It closed seven years later, but other aerial lifts began to be constructed, eventually opening the Bernese Alps to skiers in the winter and to tourists all year round. In Mürren, another hill town above Lauterbrunnen (at 1,650 m or 5,413 ft.), a small museum in the cable car station there pays tribute to the “great idea” of building a lift, or more precisely two of them, to the top of the Schilthorn, which overlooks Mürren from an elevation of 2,970 m (9,744 ft.). The two lifts were completed in 1967, the higher one being exceptionally long and technically challenging (fig. 4). But



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FIG. 4 Ski lift at Mürren. (Source: Photograph by the authors.)

the “great idea” demanded even more: a revolving restaurant was built atop the Schilthorn. From this improbable perch, the restaurant starred in a James Bond movie (*On Her Majesty’s Secret Service*, 1969). The older but equally improbable Eiger Tunnel provided a dramatic rescue at the end of Clint Eastwood’s film *The Eiger Sanction* (1975).

To this day, the Swiss continue to upgrade the technological web. In 1997 a new *Wanderweg* trail opened, allowing even the most casual walker to skirt the foot of the North Face of the Eiger. Extensive rebuilding of the railway to Wengen was completed in 2009. Foot trails have been reconstructed to accommodate mountain bikes. Now you can cycle from Kleine Scheidegg down to Lauterbrunnen as part of the National Mountain Biking Route #1, which stretches 665 km (413 miles) from one end of Switzerland to the other. Even more extreme challenges are constantly being invented. The “inferno” ski race from the top of the Schilthorn—the longest and supposedly most treacherous downhill race in the world—began to be held in 1928. Now there is also a Schilthorn triathlon ending at the summit. The Jungfrau Marathon, run every autumn, has become an international draw. The Bernese Oberland is at once the natural and the technological sublime: Alpine spectacle and extreme adventure in a high mountain range that is also an astoundingly complex human-built world (fig. 5).

* * *

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FIG. 5 The Bernese Oberland: the natural and the technological sublime at once. (Source: Photograph by the authors.)

Our trip went well. We had good luck with the weather, which was warm-to-hot, sunny, and clear. The first day Chuck and I repeated what we had done fifty-one years earlier, hiking the trail from Lauterbrunnen up to Wengen. It is not long (3.1 km or 1.9 miles) but it is steep (about a 500 m or 1,640 ft. vertical climb), and in fifty-one years it had lost none of its beauty and interest. Once more we started out full of animal freshness. Our good spirits increased when we saw that Wengen, while larger and still growing, remains recognizably rustic and quaint, no doubt due to severe restrictions on development. Once more we could enjoy a cheese-baguette-and-Coke lunch on the patio of a small restaurant, breathing mountain air and savoring the scenery. Once more the cog railway chugged into the station at regular intervals.

This time we kept hiking beyond Wengen, up to the cog railway stop at Wengernalp (another 4.3 km or 2.7 miles in distance and 579 m or 1,900 ft. altitude). Houses thinned out, other walkers thinned out, and cows appeared, the bells around their necks clanging loudly as they were prodded by cowgirls toward a lower meadow. Before the trip I had reread *Heidi*, a favorite book of my girlhood, which had reminded me that there had long been industry in these mountains—the dairy industry. In *Heidi* the featured animals are goats rather than cows, but the migration patterns are the same: the Alpine meadows are the factory floor for summer grazing.

Chuck and I were still among cows when we reached the cog railway stop at Wengernalp. A descending train returned us to Interlaken, where we enjoyed an excellent dinner in the Golden Anchor, a restaurant next door to the Hotel Bellevue. After dinner, checking the weather forecasts in the hotel lobby, we learned that the next day would be the least fair of the week. We were already confident that we could complete our Lauterbrunnen-to-Grindelwald goal in three days, and so we decided to spend the next day being tourists in Interlaken.

The city is still a place from which to gaze at Alpine peaks, but it has also become a huge outdoor adventure park, center of a wild array of technology-intensive activities ranging from skiing to whitewater rafting to Zorbing (rolling down mountainsides in big plastic bubbles). The most popular adventure sport, it appears, is paragliding. Even—especially—on the main drag of Interlaken, you are always looking up to see who might be floating slowly down from a distant hillside to a large meadow, used as a landing strip, that runs along one part of the main street, directly across from some of the grande-dame hotels dating from the nineteenth century. Into the meadow drift tourists ranging from children to old-timers, suspended between delight and terror, while also suspended below a watchful guide.

Neither Chuck nor I cared to try this ourselves. Instead, we tried yet another component of the Alpine transport system: a funicular railway, built in the late 1800s, rising sharply from the River Aare to one of the hilltops overlooking the city. There we found, pleasantly and inevitably, a restaurant with an expansive patio. Thanks to an old-fashioned tourist technology, we enjoyed an approximation of a paraglider's view of the region.

The next day, our third in Interlaken, we were back on the trail. As forecast, the weather was splendid. We took the cog railway back to Wengernalp and from there started walking upward to Kleine Scheidegg, at an altitude of 2,061 m or 6,762 ft. Since the late 1800s, Kleine Scheidegg has been the key railway intersection at the foot of the triple Alpine crown of the Jungfrau, Mönch, and Eiger. Unsurprisingly, it is considerably larger and more crowded than it was in 1959. It is also more international. Most of the walkers seemed to be French, Germans, or Brits of our vintage. The mountain bikers were younger and included more Americans. Chinese tourist groups crowded onto the cog railway to go up to the Jungfrauoch. A souvenir shop shaped like a tepee attracted all nationalities.

Chuck and I walked up a short (2 km, 1.2 miles) trail from Kleine Scheidegg to Eigergletscher, where we settled in for lunch at the restaurant that had first opened in 1899. Currently the children's part of the menu advertises specials named Micky [*sic*] Mouse, Sponge Bob, and Spiderman. We ordered rösti instead and contemplated the glaciers of the Jungfrau, Mönch, and Eiger as we feasted on the terrace. We tried to remember how large they had been in 1959. We had no way of doing a comparison then

and there, but we assumed they had since shrunk considerably and promised ourselves to check this out later.

After lunch, we set out on the relatively new Eiger Trail, which took us along the talus of the North Face. It was an ideal hike for an afternoon (6 km or 3.7 miles), gently descending (from 2,327 m or 7,635 ft. to 1,613 m or 5,292 ft.), exciting without being terrifying. We crossed scree, streams, and snowfields. On the icy snow, Chuck would go first, while I would literally follow in his footsteps.

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It was a long day, and we were tired by the time we rejoined the cog railway at Alpiglen, a station a few miles west of Grindelwald, and boarded a car to head back to Interlaken. After reviving ourselves with dinner, we headed to the central market square to enjoy another treat of the information age: a jumbo-screen broadcast of the World Cup semifinal match between Germany and Spain. Spain won, which did not please most of the crowd, but the summer evening would beat anything. Over the landing field nearby, not paragliders but swallows swooped, while the summit of the Jungfrau glowed in the long pink sunset.

The next morning, our fourth and last day, Chuck and I took the cog railway back to Alpiglen and started out for Grindelwald. Hikers always say that descending is harder than ascending, and it was downhill almost all the way (a distance of about 6 km or 3.7 miles, and a drop in elevation of 579 m or 1,900 ft.). The conventional wisdom proved true: my feet began to develop blisters near the halfway point. Nevertheless, the route never lacked for scenic vistas. The Wetterhorn (3,692 m or 12,113 ft.) towered over us, and the trail provided numerous points of interest. We encountered troughs providing water for cows and spigots providing water for hikers. We walked by reforestation and road construction projects, admiring the carefully engineered trail outfitted with steps and handholds on the steepest parts. Nevertheless, I was glad to hit the bottom of the hill in Grindelwald.

We had accomplished our hiking goal, and it was still only early afternoon. We decided to visit another place we had not been before—the village of Mürren, overlooking Lauterbrunnen on the opposite side of the valley from Wengen. This excursion proved a rapid recapitulation of most of the Alpine transportation network: train back to Lauterbrunnen; cable car up the waterfall side of the valley; “heritage” railway to Mürren; cable car down to the valley floor; bus back to Lauterbrunnen; and railway back to Interlaken.

The excursion felt shamelessly touristic but turned out to be warmly human. On the heritage railway, Chuck and I arrived too late to get a seat on the valley side of the car, which offered by far the better view. An elderly lady insisted that we take her seat on the valley side so we could admire the scenery, explaining (as best she could without much English and us without Swiss German) that she was from Mürren and could do this any time, while we might never have the chance again. When we got to Mürren, we

wanted to take some brother-and-sister photos on a restaurant patio. The women we asked to do this turned out to be another pair of siblings, also traveling together to a place they had visited in their youth. Each pair took turns photographing the other. After one last dinner at the Golden Anchor and a good night's sleep, we packed up and left the Hotel Bellevue the next morning for Zürich and our flight back to Boston.

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* * *

E. B. White wrote one of his best-known and most-beloved essays, "Once More to the Lake," in the summer of 1941. It too tells the story of a generational journey of return and remembrance: in White's account, the father-writer takes his son for a week's vacation at a Maine lake where the father had spent many happy boyhood summers. All through the week White, the father, begins to feel he is not so much remembering his own past as reenacting it. He describes how his son uses gestures and words he himself would have used at that age. His son responds as he would have then. He begins to wonder who is who. "It gave me a creepy sensation," the father writes.⁴

There was nothing creepy about the trip that Chuck and I took. For a sentimental journey—a pilgrimage to recover lost time, to connect with the dead, to honor the past—it felt surprisingly unsentimental. For the most part we lived in the present, and there we had a wonderful time. We enjoyed the weather, scenery, accommodations, food, and exercise. We did not often talk about our parents. However, like White, we became aware of how much of the past is captured not by conscious remembrance but by less-conscious reincarnation. Like our parents, we kept notes, if not a diary. Like our father we found ourselves admiring Swiss engineering (everything from solid copper downspouts to large cranes for erecting multistory buildings) and trying to figure out how things worked. I often realized I was repeating words, phrases, and sayings of my mother. When I took photos, I was aware of trying to get a spot of red in them as Dad always advised.

When Chuck and I became conscious of the passage of time, it was usually in connection with technological change conventionally defined as material devices and systems. Most obviously, the air-transport system of today is vastly more crowded, hectic, security-conscious, and faster than that of 1959. Changes in communications systems are similarly obvious. In 1959 we relied on postcards to connect with the United States and telephone operators to connect within Europe. In the twenty-first century, we happily used netbooks, internet, and email, with only minor aggravations from the imperfections of the wireless system in the hotel.

A similar intrusiveness of technological details is noted by E. B. White

4. E. B. White, "Once More to the Lake," in *One Man's Meat*, 8th ed. (1938; reprint, New York, 1944), 248.

in “Once More to the Lake.” It is the little things that jolt him into awareness of the passage of time: the snarling of the outboard motors on boats in contrast to the purring of inboard motors he recalls from his childhood; the two ruts on the dirt road to the camp made by automobile tires in contrast to the three tracks of the past (two made by cartwheels, and one well-manured one made by the horse). On our 2010 summer trip I began to ponder how much our whole sense of time passing—indeed, our whole sense of what history is—has come to be defined by material changes such as these. They are at once trivial and intrusive. They command our attention so that “technology” becomes the word we rely on to describe historical change in general. Less immediately visible changes (social, economic, political) can get crowded out of the picture.

I began to think about some of these other types of historical change that had transformed the world during the past fifty years. I have mentioned two already: the geographical migration of industry to cheaper and supposedly less-demanding labor, and the end of legal segregation in the United States, as part of even broader changes in race relations. These historical events were central to our lives in Salem, if not to our 1959 trip to Europe. What did seem central to that trip was what is now typically called cold war history. In 1959 we were impressed by the still-looming presence of World War II, manifest in loops of barbed wire and bunkers dug into the mountains near the Swiss border. I also remember being faintly nervous about crossing the border into Austria, which had not been liberated from Soviet control for very long.

Only in retrospect did we realize that on our trip we had been engaged in a set of social activities that would eventually help bring an end to the cold war: a large, not-especially-technological system of people-to-people exchanges involving Americans and Europeans. Our family was welcomed in Zürich by an American postdoc at ETH there (Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule, the leading Swiss technical university) who had studied with our mother’s brother, a professor of chemical engineering at Georgia Tech. (The postdoc is the one who took us to the fondue restaurant our first night in Europe.) Later on our trip we were hosted by another American graduate student in Heidelberg, again through the good offices of our uncle. Throughout the trip, we and others on the charter flight were welcomed by a series of hosts involved in various exchange programs. Chuck and I both had European pen pals. After we returned, our parents hosted a series of exchange students through the American Field Service, the Experiment in International Living, and similar programs. We are still in touch with a French Experimenter they hosted in 1968.

But we had to stop and think to recall the historical importance of these experiences. They may have been of considerable significance in cold war history, but you could not see them the way you noticed even trivial technological changes. On the other hand, there were other material changes,

not in the human-built world but in the given one, that failed to make much of an impression for other reasons. When Chuck and I were gazing at the ice fields from the restaurant terrace at Eigergletscher, we could only guess how much the glaciers might have retreated in fifty-one years. The human senses and mind are not constructed to make such then-and-now comparisons, unless the contrast is startling. Even if they were, visual observations of glacial retreat are not necessarily a reliable guide to scientific conclusions.

After our trip, when we went online to check on glacial retreat, we learned, first of all, that information from simple visual observation “is extremely robust,” and, second, that collective evidence

leaves no doubt that today the shrinking of mountain glaciers is taking place at a global scale and at a rapid rate. The strikingly synchronous retreat in many parts of the world since the late 20th century may be unique; in many regions, glaciers have now been reduced close to their minimum extent during the climate optimums in the Holocene, i.e. in the past 10,000 years . . . —and in some places even beyond this.⁵

While the European Alps account for only a small percentage of global glaciers and ice packs (around 1 percent), they are unusually well-documented.

Glaciers there lost about half their total volume, or 0.5% per year, between 1850 and 1975. Another 25%, or 1% per year, of the remaining volume vanished between 1975 and 2000, and an additional 15 to 25%, or 2 to 3% per year, was lost in the first years of our century.⁶

According to ETH researchers, reporting at the end of 2008, Swiss glaciers have been losing about a meter of thickness each year since 1999, and the rate of loss is accelerating. From 2006 to 2008 the Eiger glacier lost almost 10 percent of its length.⁷

When humans build railway lines and tunnels through Alpine peaks, they are showing the mountains who is boss. Climate change represents another technological conquest of the Alps, but an unintended and largely negative one. It is not just that the lovely, delicate Alpine flowers may dis-

5. Wilfried Haeberli and Michael Zemp, “Mountain Glaciers: On Thin Ice,” with contributions from T. Chinn, P. Mool, and M. Zapata, in *Mountains and Climate Change: From Understanding to Action*, ed. Th. Kohler and D. Maselli (Bern, 2009), 21–29.

6. Ibid.

7. See news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/7770472.stm and glaciology.ethz.ch/messnetz/index.html. Mountaineer and filmmaker David Breashears has undertaken extended photographic comparisons of mountain glaciers in the Himalaya in a Glacier Research Imaging Project sponsored through the nonprofit organization GlacierWorks: <http://sites.asiasociety.org/riversofice/about> (all websites accessed 9 May 2011).

appear. The dairy industry will be damaged if reduced glaciers lead to reduced water supplies, especially in the late summer. In addition, hydro-power production from Alpine reservoirs would decline, affecting not only Switzerland, with its heavy reliance on hydroelectricity, but also the rapidly expanding European network, which uses Alpine reservoirs to cover short-term peak demands. The load factor of the network “will also have to be fundamentally re-thought, with a view to storing water in wintertime and releasing it in summer-time—the opposite of current practice.”⁸

When you visit the Alps, you stand at the conjunction of two time scales: the human and the geological. It makes you wonder if history has a future—that is, history in the sense that humans have traditionally thought of it. Technological change has become so rapid and noticeable that it serves as a stand-in for historical change in general, crowding out less visible social, economic, and political events. And when geological change speeds up, it too becomes part of history, altering the very stage on which we humans act our parts.

* * *

When E. B. White goes back again to the lake with his son, he keeps thinking how time repeats itself, how familiar it all is, how he could be his own son. At the end of the trip, when he sees his son shivering as the boy gets ready to take a post-thunderstorm swim, the father is startled into confronting the fact of his own mortality. He begins to feel as if he is already a ghost. Generation after generation may repeat common experience, but each individual moves toward the grave.

When Chuck and I repeated a trip we had taken with our ghostly parents, we were also unavoidably confronting the edge of doom—which for our generation is also the advancing edge of the baby boom. I am sure there is some element of trying to deny your own mortality in wanting to repeat a past experience, but even stronger is the realization that denial is impossible. Any journey on this earth is a metaphor for our life’s journey in time. Journeys come to an end.

Mountains, inherently dangerous places, can hasten the end. In 1959, the day before our family took the cog railway to Kleine Scheidegg, rescuers brought down the body of an Italian climber from the North Face of the Eiger. He had been part of a party of four, only one of whom survived the attempted ascent two years before; his body had been dangling from a climbing rope ever since. In 2010 we described this grim event to one of the hotel owners. As it happened, he had recently seen (and highly recommended) the German film *North Face* (2008), which recounts a 1936 race to climb the then-still-unscaled wall of the mountain. The movie portrays

8. Haeberli and Zemp.

the competition between German and Austrian teams, who struggled and for the most part died with working-class stoicism while bourgeois reporters covering the story wine and dined at the Kleine Scheidegg station not far away. (The North Face was finally scaled in 1938 by a German, who was lauded by Hitler for his feat. The coming of the war was already in the air, even mountain air.)

All the high places of the world are dangerous, because you must rely on complex technologies to take you there and get you back safely. In 1959 the first leg of our return flight from Zürich to Boston, on the AMC-chartered BOAC Boeing Stratocruiser, was uneventful. After stopping in London and refueling at Shannon Airport, we re-boarded and headed westward over the Atlantic. Twenty minutes out of Shannon, engine number four quit. The pilot executed a 180-degree turn and headed the aircraft back to London. There the engine was repaired, while we enjoyed an unexpected extra day of sightseeing and more shopping.

On July 29 we took off again. About 1,000 miles out of Shannon, as most of us were asleep or nearly so, the same engine that had caused trouble on our first attempt to fly home blew up. The explosion tore off most of the engine's cowling, but one large piece, held on by a few rivets, stuck out at an acute angle from the wing. The cowling fluttered like a sheet on a clothesline, setting up air currents that made the whole plane shudder.

The captain again turned back. The distance was greater than if we had continued westward, but heading east we had the wind behind us. He throttled back to a minimum flying speed to reduce vibration. This in turn caused the airplane to lose altitude, so that we ended up flying about 1,000 feet above the waters of the Atlantic. The crew jettisoned bottles, trays, and anything they could think of to reduce weight. They told us that personal baggage would be next to go if necessary. We passengers were helped into "Mae West" life preservers and prepared to ditch. Ships in the area were re-directed toward our flight path in case of this eventuality. An RAF Sunderland aircraft was dispatched from London to escort us, as well as a DC-7 en route from New York to London.

Chuck and I were nervous but not panicked. Everyone onboard felt vaguely reassured when the two escort aircraft appeared alongside. Our plane was still flying, although it felt like a bus traveling on a dirt road at high speed. Later, our father told us he was frightened either that the cowling would break loose and hit the tail section, or that the shuddering would cause metal fatigue, which could make the whole airplane fall apart.

After about four hours of anxiety, our airplane landed at Shannon Airport. We passengers broke into relieved applause for the skill of our captain. We were shepherded onto a bus that drove us across the Irish countryside to a rural hotel, where we were put up for the night. The flat green damp earth was a welcome sight. The next day, another aircraft, a DC-7,

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flew us without incident across the Atlantic to Boston. Chuck and I were able to continue our lives' journeys for another fifty-plus years: a bonus, a mortal afterlife.

We live in change; it lives in us; and our changes are not over. Change dominates the storyline of our lives, individually and collectively. The less-storied line is that of continuity: less-noticed, less-celebrated, but no less essential. A sense of continuity connects past, present, and projected future. Without it, we are lost as surely as if we are flying over the trackless ocean. We need to glimpse, now and then, a rainbow whose arc invites us to connect with the other shore. Repeating a journey, like writing history, arises not from an impossible desire to relive experience, but from an essential need to understand it.

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