

**Three names, one life:  
Elizabeth Main, Elizabeth Burnaby, Elizabeth Le Blond**

By Markus M. Britschgi MA, Art Historian and Professor FHZ-HGKL

Elizabeth Main was born Elizabeth Alice Frances Hawkins-Whitshed, the only child of Sir St. Vincent Bentinck Hawkins-Whitshed, 3rd Baronet of Killincarrick in Ireland. Her family was well-connected, and she herself was fond of pointing out that her ancestry could be traced back to Catherine the Great.

At the age of eighteen she married Fred Burnaby, described as “a very colourful personality”: he was posted to Russia and Turkey, and fought for the British Empire in Egypt and Sudan. He was a balloonist and best-selling author, and Elizabeth soon began to compete with him. If he went up in a hot air balloon, she would seek out lofty heights through her own efforts. She would climb the highest mountains in central Europe, and later the peaks of northern Norway. She also took photographs and in her eighteen books she described the world of Swiss mountains and its inhabitants - often with a critical eye - as well as late Victorian and Edwardian society.

Today her name is familiar to only a few enthusiasts who take an interest in the history of photography and alpinism. A book published in September 2003 now brings the enthralling life story of Elizabeth Main to a wider audience.

The Alps became Mrs Main’s adopted home, after Ireland and London. From 1880 onwards she was a regular visitor. Sent to Interlaken because of her ill-health, she quickly became an alpinist specialising in winter climbing. She began to record her impressions and regularly published books, including *High Life and Towers of Silence*. And she rapidly made a name for herself as a photographer and tireless promoter of winter sports in the Engadine.

Soon she began to illustrate her books with her own photographs and sold the prints in St Moritz and at Spooners in London. Mrs Main met Vittorio Sella on Mont Blanc and in Zermatt, and later they climbed the Wetterhorn together, having a common interest in photography. Elizabeth Main always carried her camera with her, and used the latest photographic technology available. Instead of sketching, she concentrated on the photographic image and became a master of “straight photography”, drawing her inspiration from the beauty of the mountains and avoiding the pictorial tendencies which became popular around 1890. Nothing escaped her: “The world has no secrets before my eyes.” In the view of the *Alpine Journal*, her most striking characteristic was “an exceptional faculty of judgement, which was never surpassed by any climber of the so-called stronger sex”. She exuded self-confidence.

At the age of 46 Elizabeth Main became the founding president of the Ladies Alpine Club in 1907, following an unprecedented career as an alpinist. But

London took a dim view of her successes. "Stop her climbing mountains", wrote Lady Bentinck, her aristocratic great-aunt. "She is scandalizing all London and looks like a Red Indian."

Elizabeth Main lost her first husband in 1885, and her second husband, Dr J. F. Main, died in 1892. Her career as a photographer, her greatest achievements in the Alps and many of her publications were associated with the name of a man who no longer shared her life. Perhaps that was why almost 70 years passed before some 400 original prints reappeared at the Palace Hotel in St Moritz, which led to the first attempts to shed light on the woman with the three names. Following her third marriage to Francis Bernard Aubrey Le Blond she simply left her pictures there. After her death her obituaries were detailed and full of praise for a woman who had played a pioneering role in the history of alpinism in Switzerland.

The moment has come to rescue and publish this unique photographic record.

*Elizabeth Main (1861-1934)*

*Alpinist, Photographer, Writer*

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Website: [www.diopter.com](http://www.diopter.com) E-mail: [info@diopter.com](mailto:info@diopter.com)

See website for portfolio of ten photographs by Elizabeth Main.

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