

LESLIE STEPHEN'S PHILOSOPHY OF SPORT

Samuel Webb 

PhD student, Trinity Hall

Leslie Stephen was no Romantic but if he was Romantic about anything it was sport. A characteristic example is his response to watching the 'Oxford and Cambridge sports', a collection of athletic varsity matches which had been established in 1864.¹ 'My feet were imbedded in a freezing mixture of mud and melting snow', Stephen writes in *Sketches from Cambridge: By A Don* (1865): 'Beyond it I dimly caught sight through the snowflakes of wild figures careering at intervals across the field, or heaving weights, jumping bars, and throwing cricket-balls'.² At this point, Stephen was in his early thirties and a recently departed fellow at Trinity Hall, a small yet highly athletic college (so he was still young enough to sympathise with the young undergraduates).³ 'Here, I thought is a fine chance for composing a poetical peroration on muscular Christianity', he writes, in a moment of imaginary flight: 'My ideas naturally took the form of a sermon; and the text was the dogma attributed to the devotees of the sect whose strange rites I was contemplating; namely that a man's whole duty was to fear God, and walk 1,000 miles in 1,000 hours'.⁴ This sermon would be divided into 'three heads': 'first, that such an athlete was, of necessity a true *man*; secondly, that he was a true University man; and, thirdly, that he was a true Christian'.⁵

The first two heads of this never performed sermon are probably unsurprising to anyone acquainted with Stephen. In his many biographical, philosophical, and journalistic writings, he often promoted an ideal of 'manliness' which recommended courageously 'facing the facts', shirking sentimentality, and participating in athletic feats, such as walking from Cambridge to London to attend a dinner at the Alpine Club, or descending Mont Blanc in the dark.⁶ And his associations with Cambridge as a 'true University man' remained longstanding throughout his life: although he officially resigned his fellowship in 1862, and moved to London in 1864 to pursue a writing life, he maintained good relations with the

¹ This is Stephen's colloquial phrase for what were called the 'Cambridge and Oxford Athletic Games': see [Leslie Stephen], *Sketches from Cambridge: By A Don* (London: Macmillan and Co, 1865), p. 21. The 'varsity' games were first held at Oxford in March 1864 and included 'the 100y, 440y, Mile, Steeplechase, 120y hurdles, 220y hurdles, High Jump and Long Jump': see <<https://www.cuac.org.uk/history>> [Accessed 20th March 2026].

² Stephen, *Sketches from Cambridge*, pp. 21-22.

³ Stephen had a Bye-fellowship at the college which required taking orders as well as signing up to the Thirty-Nine Articles: see F.W. Maitland, *The Life and Letters of Leslie Stephen* (London: Duckworth and Co., 1906), p. 53.

⁴ Stephen, *Sketches from Cambridge*, p. 22.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁶ 'I still think with complacency of the hot day in which I did my fifty miles from Cambridge to London in twelve hours to attend a dinner of the Alpine Club': Leslie Stephen, *Some Early Impressions* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1924), p. 47.

University, and accepted an honorary fellowship in 1901. Since Stephen's death, Trinity Hall has somewhat repaid the favour: the Jerwood Library maintains a healthy collection of his books, 'The Leslie Stephen Lecture' occurs every two years, and 'The Leslie Stephen Room' remains an important venue for the college's smaller dinners and events.

But that third head—that he was a true Christian—is remarkably unlike Stephen. After all, the 'Reverend Leslie Stephen', as he then was, resigned his *clerical* Trinity Hall fellowship in 1862, because he felt he could no longer subscribe to the Thirty-Nine Articles. (This was a requirement for all university fellows until the abolition of the University Test Acts in 1871). That this was a blow for Stephen is recorded by his biographer, Noel Annan, in which it is revealed that Stephen contemplated taking his own life in response to 'coming out' as a non-believer.⁷ In the next paragraph of *Sketches*, Stephen then surreptitiously acknowledges his loss of faith: 'I have unfortunately quite forgotten the logical process by which I arrived at this last result. It is indeed only when my mind is specially excited that it becomes sensitive to the delicate logical chain by which the merit of physical excellence is connected with the teachings of the Gospels'.⁸ This is one of a handful of unbelieving moments sprinkled throughout *Sketches*.⁹ (Later on, he became bolder and penned the first defence of agnosticism in 1876.)¹⁰ But, even if Stephen could no longer subscribe to 'Muscular Christianity', which he admitted he had been enamoured by in his early life, he derived a deep and occasionally sacred meaning from sport, which remained a constant source of friendship, purpose, and inspiration throughout his life.¹¹

It is tempting to think of Stephen's relationship with sport as the salve which soothed the wound of his loss of faith. At the very least, sport seemed a good deal of fun, especially rowing, the activity he was most enthused by in his Cambridge days. 'Amongst the many varieties of athletic sport at the Universities [...] boating has a clear pre-eminence, and the boating-man is the purest type of the genuine University athlete'.¹² In the 1850s, Trinity Hall had forty-one undergraduates (the second smallest college, bar Downing) but two eight-oared boats, which speaks to the rowing mania at the time.

⁷ Noel Annan, *Leslie Stephen: The Godless Victorian* (New York: Random House, 1984), pp. 45-6. Henry Fawcett said that he was discussing Stephen's troubles with him, and, in Annan's words, 'when he quitted him Stephen's state of mind was such that Fawcett entertained serious fears he might cut his throat during the night'. Annan is somewhat sceptical that Stephen meant this statement literally but accepts that the intention behind the comment is ultimately unknown.

⁸ Stephen, *Sketches from Cambridge*, p. 22.

⁹ See also *ibid.*, pp. 55, 71, & 136.

¹⁰ Leslie Stephen, 'An Agnostic's Apology', *Fortnightly Review* (June 1876)—later republished in Leslie Stephen, *An Agnostic's Apology and Other Essays* (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1893). Although Thomas Henry Huxley invented the word agnosticism in 1869 in a meeting of the Metaphysical Society, Stephen appears to be the first agnostic who wrote a defence of the position in print: see Bernard Lightman, *The Origins of Agnosticism* (London: John Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 93.

¹¹ Stephen wrote that 'I preached that part of the Kingsley-Hughes creed with a zeal of which perhaps I ought to be ashamed', but also that '[s]o far, indeed, as I am personally concerned, I have nothing but satisfaction in recalling my monomania': Stephen, *Some Early Impressions*, pp. 46-7.

¹² Stephen, *Sketches from Cambridge*, p. 13.

Stephen was not particularly good (he never graduated from the second boat), but his enthusiasm was nonetheless undimmed. And he really came into his own when he became a coach. His crowning achievement was Trinity Hall winning 'Head of the River' in 1859 and again in 1862.¹³ 'I shall never forget the joy with which he caught hold of my hand and shook it', the stroke of the boat said after victory, 'He very nearly upset us all into the river'.¹⁴ Stephen was a stern yet respectable coach, and to the chagrin of Henry Latham, another fellow, was frequently seen sprinting along the river bank, keeping pace with the boat as his long legs strode fearsomely while he encouraged the young men to pull ever harder.¹⁵ Latham thought this unbefitting for a fellow of the College. At dinners, rowing was often the main topic of conversation: which crew would finish Head of the River was typically more important than who was likely to finish Senior Wrangler (i.e. top of the Mathematical Tripos) or how the American Civil War was playing out.¹⁶ Stephen's quarters also became the place for late night discussions about rowing, and thus, as Stephen writes in *Sketches*, in many ways, the sport was a form of escapism.¹⁷

Rowing fulfils all the requisite conditions by which an undergraduate's amusements must be fitted to his liking. It goes on all the year round, and interferes with his studies; it requires a great deal of very hard and disagreeable work; it rubs holes in his skin, raises blisters on his hands, and gives him a chance of an occasional ducking; when pursued to excess, it may even injure his health for life; and it gives him an excuse for periodical outbursts of hilarity, which, if skilfully managed, may lead into scrapes with the authorities.¹⁸

Many an undergraduate rower of Trinity Hall today is likely to recognise the truth of Stephen's description here: the ways in which the hard effort of struggling and sweating with an oar on the surface of the Cam is often used as an excuse for a late essay or missing supervision. The cheeky reference to 'interfer[ing] with his studies' makes Stephen appear someone who, at this point at least, was work-shy but rowing-keen—a 'rowing rough' rather than a serious student. 'You may count every day spent on the river as a place lost in the Tripos', he writes.¹⁹

But, in fact, Stephen worked hard at his studies, and the rest of his writing career, in which he published dozens of books, hundreds of articles, and edited the original *Dictionary of National Biography* (all sixty-three volumes), suggests that this description of shirking here might be on the performative side.²⁰ He also finished Twentieth Wrangler in the Maths

¹³ Annan, *Leslie Stephen*, p. 29.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

¹⁶ See Stephen, *Some Early Impressions*, p. 46.

¹⁷ Annan, *Leslie Stephen*, p. 32.

¹⁸ Stephen, *Sketches from Cambridge*, pp. 13-14.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

²⁰ These sixty-three volumes were published from 1885 (Vol. 1) to 1900 (Vol. 63). For a comprehensive sketch of the history of the *DNB*, see Juliette Atkinson, "Forgotten Benefactors":

Tripes, a respectable performance, which was 'halfway up the first class of a field of 143 men'.²¹ And this achievement was one of the reasons why he was elected a fellow in 1854. Moreover, in other moments, he emphasised how the discipline of rowing prevented 'loafing'.²² In sleepy mid-nineteenth-century Cambridge, the main distractions were drinking in pubs, gambling at Newmarket, and participating in general hooliganism, so 'Stephen's cult of athleticism was a palliative for the recurrent disease of student boredom'.²³ It was thought that the physical strenuousness and routine encouraged by rowing translated into better performances in examinations. 'I really believed that I was acting from a high sense of duty when I encouraged my pupils in rowing', Stephen reminisced later.²⁴ In an era of tuberculosis, Irish fever, cholera, and general malnourishment, rowing toughened the body, encouraged discipline, and strengthened the character, and this was a particular concern for Stephen's parents who had suffered the bereavement of their eldest son, Herbert, who died at twenty-two from typhoid.²⁵ Stephen himself had been a sickly child and was deemed to possess, in a typically ambiguous Victorian diagnosis, a 'disordered circulation'.²⁶ And throughout his life, Stephen especially admired people who overcame physical adversity, such as his cousin, the jurist A.V. Dicey, who was 'plagued' with a persistent 'muscular weakness', and his lifelong friend (and fellow tutor) Henry Fawcett, who, despite his blindness, became a major political economist and women's rights advocate.²⁷ Rather than mucking around, then, rowing was more properly a pattern for action for Stephen which taught him the virtues of discipline, friendship, a healthy mind, a healthy body, and competition.

That last quality was especially important and reflected in the University's curriculum. When Stephen went up to Cambridge in 1850, the only two Triposes which a student could be examined for were Maths and Classics.²⁸ The majority of students took

The Dictionary of National Biography, *Victorian Biography Reconsidered: A Study of Nineteenth-Century "Hidden" Lives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 216-251.

²¹ Annan, *Leslie Stephen*, p. 28.

²² F.W. Maitland, *Life and Letters*, p. 64.

²³ Annan, *Leslie Stephen*, p. 34.

²⁴ Stephen, *Some Early Impressions*, p. 46.

²⁵ See Annan, *Leslie Stephen*, p. 14.

²⁶ Maitland, *Life and Letters*, p. 27.

²⁷ See Annan, p. 29 for information regarding Stephen's admiration for Dicey. For more on Dicey's health condition, see Richard A. Cosgrove, 'Dicey, Albert Venn (1835–1922), jurist', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*

<<https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-32811>> [Accessed 20th March 2026].

²⁸ Stefan Collini, 'Cambridge', *Literature and Learning: A History of English Studies in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025), p. 193: 'Until the middle of the nineteenth century, candidates for the Classical Tripes had first to have taken the Mathematical Tripes, and these were the only two routes to a degree or to the university prizes and college fellowships that might follow. In the 1850s the subordination of Classics to Mathematics was abolished, and, in addition, two new Triposes were established, in the natural sciences and the moral sciences, though in their early years these upstarts lacked both the prestige and the number of candidates of the older courses. Triposes in Law, History, Theology, and other subjects followed in the 1860s and 1870s'. For more on the

the former, with Classics being far more important at Oxford.²⁹ It was possible to attend lectures in other subjects, but these were normally poorly taught and students could not be examined in them. (The Natural Sciences Tripos and Moral Sciences Tripos were established in 1851, but both took a while to gain similar reputations.)³⁰ On the face of it, the justification for spending so much time on Maths was that it prepared the undergraduate for other areas of life: 'The best education was that which afforded the best course of mental gymnastics; not that which imparted the greatest quantity of practically useful knowledge', Stephen sums up.³¹ Just as rowing trained the body, Maths trained the mind. It was at the heart of a 'liberal' education, and 'there is a closer analogy than might at first sight be evident between the directions taken by our muscular and cerebral energy. To go no further, we expend a great deal of both upon objects intrinsically useless, and, moreover, their uselessness is often put forward as a recommendation'.³² (The same could be said for Classics, which, in this period at least, was more about translating ancient verse rather than understanding ancient Greek or Roman literature or culture.)³³

And yet, Stephen was sceptical of the 'mental gymnastics' argument, suggesting that many students do not become more knowledgeable or capable as a result of studying Maths or Classics. A 'mental training' could be achieved from other subjects too: 'It is rather a severe tax upon any man's time and brains to spend three precious years, not in learning something, but in learning to learn something'.³⁴ However, he admired the Cambridge system, nonetheless, because it promoted a temper of ruthless competitiveness. Thus, Maths and Classics were closer to a constructed sport rather than a general training, and were therefore useful for the character they recommended: 'In classics and mathematics, in short, we believe that we have the best and most widely known race-course for rival candidates to run. [...] It is a matter of secondary importance to decide whether it is the best course to develop all the powers of the competitors'.³⁵ From Senior Wrangler down to the holder of the Wooden Spoon, candidates were meticulously ranked, and it was not uncommon for bets to be placed on final positions.³⁶ 'The first ten Wranglers stood an excellent chance of a Fellowship even at Trinity and St. John's; a man from a small College could hope for a Fellowship if he were placed among the Wranglers', Annan tells us.³⁷ The Cambridge way was a way of 'strenuous masculine industry', Stephen writes, 'love of fair

Natural Sciences Tripos and Moral Sciences Tripos, and their establishment, see Annan, *Leslie Stephen*, p. 24, fn 1.

²⁹ Collini, *Literature and Learning*, pp. 192-3.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

³¹ Leslie Stephen, 'Cambridge', *Life of Henry Fawcett* (London: Smith, Elder, & Co, 1886), p. 90.

³² Stephen, *Sketches from Cambridge*, p. 31.

³³ See Collini, 'The Authority of Classics', *Literature and Learning*, pp. 40-57.

³⁴ Stephen, *Sketches from Cambridge*, p. 41. See also: Stephen, *Life of Henry Fawcett*, p. 91: 'The mind may be trained as well as stored by philosophical, and scientific, and historical, and literary studies. For some minds such studies may even be more stimulating than the regular classical and mathematical round'.

³⁵ Stephen, *Sketches from Cambridge*, pp. 42-43.

³⁶ See Annan, *Leslie Stephen*, pp. 25-6.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

play, and contempt for mere showy displays of cleverness', qualities which, without too much of a stretch, applied to Stephen's hard-nosed agnosticism too—a code for how intellectual problems, and life itself, should be tackled and understood: 'The study of mathematical sciences predisposes, no doubt, to a sympathy with good hard reasoning, and our favourite antipathy was the "imposter"—that is, the man given, in another favourite phrase of ours, to "gushing" and to allowing his feelings to override his common sense'.³⁸

After leaving Cambridge, team sports became less available to Stephen. Despite this, he established a walking society in 1879, the Sunday Tramps, in which he and other writers undertook some very serious tramping indeed, normally twenty miles minimum. At one point, there were sixty members, though walking parties rarely extended beyond ten at a time. Three of the more famous Tramps were the philosopher James Sully, the painter Roger Fry, and the poet Robert Bridges, while occasional 'associates' included Positivist Frederic Harrison, physicist John Tyndall, and naturalist Charles Darwin.³⁹ 'The fellowship lasted for fifteen years and chalked up a score of 252 walks', Annan writes.⁴⁰ The majority of excursions were deep forays into the Greater London area, with the promise of a hot dinner at the end as a treat. Again, the connection between physical strenuousness and intellectualism was strong: philosophy was the most common topic of discussion, and the act of walking encouraged Stephen, otherwise an extremely taciturn walking companion, to recite a smattering of the thousands of lines of poetry he had committed to memory.⁴¹ There was also an insistence on military precision: 'He was a strategist', Stephen's other biographer (and fellow Tramp) F.W. Maitland writes, 'and those who tramped with him will best understand why every volume of the biographical dictionary appeared at the right moment'.⁴²

Always keen to scratch his athletic itch, however, from the 1850s Stephen began obsessively climbing mountains too. This remained a hobby that lasted the rest of his life. He joined the Alpine Club in 1858, the year after its founding, and visited the Alps on at least twenty-five occasions.⁴³ He was the first person to climb the Schreckhorn (in August 1861), and achieved 'the first complete ascent of Mont Blanc by the St. Gervais route'.⁴⁴ Indeed, in 1867 he was so possessed by mountain fever that he took his second wife, Harriet, to the Alps for their honeymoon.⁴⁵ Although they also went in subsequent years, Harriet eventually became so bored while her husband was climbing the Schreckhorn, Matterhorn, Jungfrau, and so on that she eventually stopped accompanying him. As late as 1899, five years before his death, Stephen was still thinking about further climbs but decided against it because of

³⁸ Stephen, *Some Early Impressions*, p. 75.

³⁹ See Annan, *Leslie Stephen*, p. 97.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁴¹ For more on Stephen's memory for poetry, see Virginia Woolf's essay on her father: 'Leslie Stephen', *Collected Essays*, 4 vols. (London: The Hogarth Press, 1967), Vol. 4, p. 77.

⁴² Maitland, *Life and Letters*, p. 361.

⁴³ See Maitland, *Life and Letters*, p. 88.

⁴⁴ Stephen claimed that he was the first person to have ascended the Schreckhorn in a letter to a pupil dated 25th October, 1861: see *ibid.*, p. 85. And for more information on Stephen's climbing of Mont Blanc, see *ibid.*, p. 84.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

old age.⁴⁶ He became President of the Alpine Club in 1865 and edited the *Alpine Journal* from 1868 to 1872. Many of his articles then appeared in the widely read classic, *The Playground of Europe* (1871), and to read that memoir is, at least at first, to be uncertain of where Stephen stands. There are many moments of profound admiration for the beauty of the mountains, and Maitland is in part right that the Alps were 'a cathedral' for Stephen, a point which, to some extent, is represented by the following from 'The Alps in Winter':⁴⁷

It was not a single mass—a flat continuous surface, as it often appears in the more emphatic lights and shades of daytime—but a whole wilderness of peak, cliff, and glacier, rising in terrace above terrace and pyramid above pyramid, divided by mysterious valleys and shadowy recesses, the forms growing more delicate as they rose, till they culminated in the grand contrast of the balanced cone of the Silberhorn and the flowing sweep of the loftiest crest. A chaos of grand forms, it yet suggests some pervading design, too subtle to be understood by mortal vision, and scorning all comparison with earthly architecture. And the whole was formed, not of vulgar ice and earth, but of incarnate light. The darkest shadow was bright against the faint cliffs of the shadowy gorge, and the highest light faint enough to be wove out of reflected moonshine. So exquisitely modulated, and at once so audacious and so delicate in its sumptuous splendours of design, it belonged to the dream region in which we appear to be inspired with supernatural influences.⁴⁸

There are similarly sublime passages throughout *Playground*. But, as if Stephen is speaking to a knowing readership who may understand the in-jokes, but if you are not part of the group you won't get it, the whole book is also laced through with a sardonic wit. The essays were written for a 'small and very friendly audience', Stephen writes: 'I fear that there will be in the following chapters a certain suspicious flavour as of conversation not quite fitted for polite society, which no use of literary disinfectants has quite removed'.⁴⁹ In many of the purple patches, like this one, the language is very close to a Wordsworthian reverie, but we are quickly pulled back to earth by sarcastic asides. In the next paragraph: 'But I am verging on the poetical. Within a few hours we are again struggling for coffee in the buffets of railway stations and forgetting all duties, pleasures, and human interests'.⁵⁰ Stephen specifically disavowed 'tall talk' when it came to mountains and criticised Ruskin's spiritually inflected imagery in *Modern Painters* (1843-60), advocating instead a harder 'cynicism' in which 'descriptions of scenery' should be interlaced with 'allusions to fleas and bitter beer'.⁵¹ Stephen thought that the mountains should be admired for the 'poetical impressions' they suggested but it was important to acknowledge the sheer difficulty of

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

⁴⁸ Leslie Stephen, *The Playground of Europe* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1946), pp. 213-4.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. xix-xx.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 214.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

climbing them, especially in an age when mountaineering was completely unregulated, and therefore too much ‘gushing’ about ascending them was distasteful.

Mountaineering was to be admired, rather, for the same reason that rowing or athletics were admired: for the competitiveness, teamwork, and bravery they encouraged: ‘The game is won when a mountain top is reached in spite of difficulties’, Stephen writes: ‘it is lost when one is forced to retreat; and, whether won or lost, it calls into play a great variety of physical and intellectual energies, and gives the pleasure which always accompanies an energetic use of our faculties’.⁵² Just as Maths and rowing pitted contestants against each other in a carefully controlled match, the mountaineer fought in a fair fight against his foe and could only win if he respected his opponent. Stephen, it should be noted, lived in a generation of relative peace (the second half of so-called ‘Pax Britannica’), but sport provided him and his contemporaries with a simulacrum of militarism. As Annan writes, ‘mountaineering was one of the few ways in which pacifist liberals could experience emotions similar to those they envied in soldiers and mariners’.⁵³ It was also a *distraction* from thinking because mountaineering required extreme concentration. As a case in point, he once became irritated with his brother, James Fitzjames Stephen, for harping on about upcoming articles in the *Saturday Review* rather than focusing on the task of climbing the Jungfrau.⁵⁴ And, as with rowing, walking, and athletics, Stephen admired mountaineering because of the friendships it encouraged. Throughout his life, he was an eminently ‘clubbable’ man in the Johnsonian vein, and notably dedicated *Playground* to his French climbing partner, Gabriel Loppé. He consistently had a great respect for guides, too, and ‘a strong aversion to hearing young climbers boast of their performances’.⁵⁵ And there was no-one whom he admired more than a tough climber; for example, one of the most humorously affectionate moments in *Playground* is when a guide falls over a hundred feet, and, after laying ‘at the bottom all night’, the ‘next morning shook himself, got up, and walked home sober, and with no broken bones’.⁵⁶

When Stephen was an older man, he remained sentimental about his former athletic achievements. His daughter, none other than the now immensely more famous Virginia Woolf, reminisced that ‘relics [...] were to be found lying about the house—the silver cup on the study mantelpiece; the rusty alpenstocks that leant against the bookcase in the corner; and to the end of his days he would speak of great climbers and explorers with a peculiar mixture of admiration and envy’.⁵⁷ And, until his death in 1904, he wrote continually about his sporting past; thus, despite his persistent disavowal of ‘sentimentalism’, Stephen could be remarkably sentimental about sport and sporting companions. And this was a paradox he never quite resolved: on the one hand, he admired the type of dedicated sportsman who did not feel his emotions strongly and performed his task without being distracted by sublime excesses or sensitivity, and yet, on the other, he longed to capture the persona of

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 218.

⁵³ Annan, *Leslie Stephen*, p. 94.

⁵⁴ Maitland, *Life and Letters*, p. 98.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

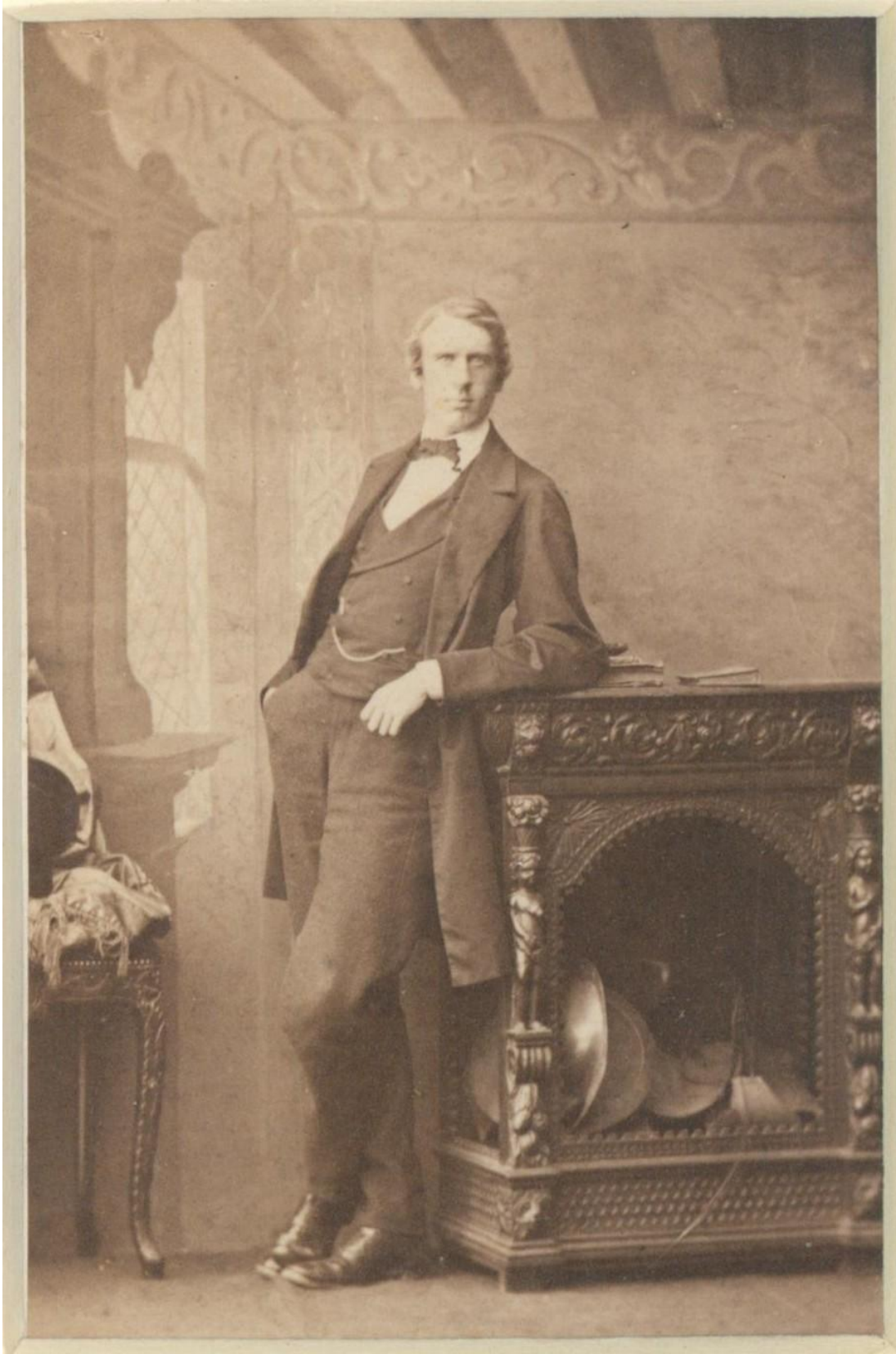
⁵⁶ Stephen, *Playground of Europe*, p. 23.

⁵⁷ Woolf, ‘Leslie Stephen’, Vol. 4, p. 76.

such sportsmen in his memoirs and essays, and this normally entailed a great deal of sensitivity and more than a dash of poetry. Another but very different nineteenth-century philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, has suggested that ‘paradox is the source of the thinker’s passion, and the thinker without a paradox is like a lover without feeling’.⁵⁸ And it would seem that it was precisely Stephen’s paradoxes—that he was a silent but sometimes cold man who yet adored friendship, and that he was an advocate of unsentimental sporting activities who wrote as much as anyone in a nostalgic way about the pleasures of sport—that make him, even now, such a curious and endlessly fascinating writer about this topic.



⁵⁸ Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. David F. Swenson (Princeton: Princeton University Press), p. 29.



Leslie Stephen c1854, Trinity Hall Archive, THPH/1/STE

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