

Scaling a Myth: Early Mountaineering in the Yukon and Alaska

The history of Europeans in North America is largely a history of people moving into unfamiliar places. It is a history of reconciling dreams and preconceptions with reality; it is a history in which the landscape has always played a fundamental role. I situate my dissertation in one of the places where myth has most visibly confronted experience: the high mountains of the Yukon and Alaska. More specifically, I will look at mountaineers who attempted to climb these peaks in the first half of the twentieth century. These climbers were almost exclusively Anglo, middle-class, urban males who had never been north of the sixtieth parallel until they immersed themselves in the North's most remote and harshest areas. As such, they make particularly good case studies of people forced to reconcile their ideas of a place with the experience of being there. I will seek to answer two broad sets of questions about these climbers. First, I will explore what motivated them to make their journeys, and whether their time in the mountains changed their views on the North, wilderness, masculinity, and/or national identity. Secondly, I will ask what climbing reveals about the connections between the above concepts.

I have not yet begun my dissertation research. This September, I entered the Ph.D. program in History at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. I decided to pursue my doctoral studies in the United States for two reasons. First of all, my proposed topic is trans-national and I need to develop a stronger knowledge of American history. Secondly, I feel that having graduate degrees in both Canadian and American history will make me far more employable upon my return to Canada. I chose Rutgers because it is widely recognised as being one of the top American schools for cultural and gender history, and because it also offers a major field concentration in environmental history. Here, I am working under the joint direction of cultural historian Jackson Lears and mountaineering historian Susan Schrepfer. My coursework consists of seminars in American cultural history, environmental history, gender history, and historical theory. In addition, I will complete three American survey courses to prepare myself for teaching. Through a Rutgers exchange program, I will also take an anthropology course from Sherry B. Ortner at Columbia University, and I am applying to attend a six-week seminar on masculinity and empire at the Cornell University School of Criticism and Theory next summer.

I hope to bring these diverse kinds of history together in a new place. During the course of researching my Master's thesis – a study of early expeditions to the most inaccessible of the Coast Mountains in British Columbia – I realised that modern historical enquiry thins out at latitudes and altitudes above the major urban centres.¹ Indeed, no major academic historian has yet written on climbing in the Yukon or Alaska. Perhaps this reflects the fact that, to most of us today, the North remains more of a mythical place than a physical one. Alaska and the Canadian territories are blank spaces on the map, their features filled in by our imaginations. Yet, neither climbing nor the North should be dismissed as anomalous or marginal fields of inquiry. The Yukon and Alaska are the “last frontier” and “the true North strong and free.” Their mountains are remote places where it still seems possible to start afresh and experience a pure and simple life. Both mountaineering and the North have become symbols of adventure, freedom, and a disappearing wilderness. In an era when the North's economic and cultural resources are increasingly being exploited, the uses of the wilderness – and the vision which underlies them – need to be more critically examined.

If mountaineering has been all but ignored by academics, its importance to mainstream culture is evidenced by the volume of mountaineering stories that have met with an eager audience since

¹ My Master's thesis is entitled, “Shifting Seas of Ice: The Munday and Mount Waddington, 1926-1934,” and was completed at Simon Fraser University under the excellent guidance of my senior supervisor, Dr. Paige Raibmon and my second reader, Dr. Tina Loo. This thesis examines exploratory expeditions by urban people to remote areas, but it is far more limited in scope than my proposed dissertation, considering only the experiences of one couple.

nineteenth-century Europeans started climbing mountains for sport. As sources, I will rely on published accounts and articles in major newspapers, popular magazines, and mountaineering journals such as the *Canadian Alpine Journal* and the *American Alpine Journal*. Archives across North America – most notably the Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies in Banff, Alberta – contain much primary evidence such as diaries and unpublished photographs. Through connections I have established with the Alpine Club of Canada and the British Columbia Mountaineering Club while researching my Master's thesis, I also have access to many lesser-known collections of climbing memorabilia.

I will begin by examining what the climbers recorded about their country, the North, the wilderness, and masculinity. I do not, however, expect their stated views to be particularly innovative or radical. My Master's research has led me to believe that most early climbers did not seek out the mountains as a place to refute dominant values. The mountaineers I have studied so far were largely conservative; while they sought to escape the city temporarily, they also hoped to transport their traditional ideas to the new landscape. Nevertheless, the mountain environment proved far more complex and difficult to negotiate than they had imagined. To better conceptualise what happened when climbers transported their urban roles and values to the mountain environment, I intend to draw on Bourdieu's theories of games and fields of interaction, particularly as applied by the anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner.² While Ortner argues that we all play a multiplicity of games, and looks at how change occurs when the rules of one game contradict those of another, I argue that change is equally possible – even inevitable – when the physical field of the game is altered. In other words, geography matters. I will examine if, and how, the climbers' experiences forced them to change their behaviour and question their values.

This project brings together wide-ranging methodological questions concerning geographical exploration, modernity, shifting meanings and myths of wilderness, masculinity, the genre of travel writing, and the construction of national identity. I have delved into all but the last of these bodies of literature for my Master's thesis, and have found the writings of William Cronon, Jackson Lears, Mary Louise Pratt, Susan Kollin, and J. A. Mangan to be particularly useful.³ I have also been intrigued by historian Peter H. Hansen's work, which examines the significance of British climbing in the Alps and Himalaya, and concludes that mountaineering both reflected and strengthened British imperialist and nationalist ideologies.⁴ Since, in this case, the mountains being climbed were most often in the climber's own nation, I will also be able to investigate to what extent the climbers considered the landscape itself a part of their national identity, and whether or not this was dependent on the "nationality" of the mountain itself.

Mountaineering is caught up in the interplay of geography and ideas; it is a site where literal viewpoints dramatically intersect with points of view. This thesis will move mountains into the foreground of history by following climbers up the highest mountains in North America, and examining the impact of their adventures on the lives of individuals and the cultures of a continent.

² Sherry B. Ortner, *Life and Death on Mount Everest: Sherpas and Himalayan Mountaineering* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999). Ortner attempts to adapt Bourdieu's ideas to better account for change – see also Pierre Bourdieu, *Sociology in Question* (London: Sage, 1993), 72-77.

³ William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness" in Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 1995). T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981). Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1997 (1992)). Susan Kollin, *Nature's State: Imagining Alaska as the Last Frontier* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001). J. A. Mangan, *Manliness and Morality: Middle-Class Masculinity in Britain and America, 1800-1940*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987).

⁴ Hansen has published many articles on mountaineering and nationalism, but most relevant to me are: "Confetti of Empire: the Conquest of Everest in Nepal, India, Britain and New Zealand," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 42 (2000): 307-332 and "Vertical Boundaries, National Identities: British Mountaineering on the Frontiers of Europe and the Empire, 1869-1914" *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 24 (1996): 48-71.