

# Of books and mountaineers

BY ZAC ROBINSON

Critics recently called mountaineering “the most literary of all sports.” This may come as a surprise to anyone who regards climbing as nothing more than the driven antics of adrenalin addicts, kids with too much free time and too little good sense. Perhaps it would be equally astonishing to the uninitiated to learn what *Canadian Alpine Journal (CAJ)* editor Sean Isaac nicely pointed out not so long ago—that Canada’s second-longest continuous running periodical (after *Maclean’s* magazine) is actually the Alpine Club of Canada’s very own *CAJ*, first printed in 1907 with its green cover and size so conspicuously akin to that of England’s revered *Alpine Journal*. But mountaineering has always demanded the printed word—and it still does.

The relationship is as old as alpine club culture. Interest in such scientific matters as geology, glaciology, botany and cartography motivated much of the early exploration of the European Alps. Enshrining these traditions, The Alpine Club in London—the forerunner to

Classics by Walter D. Wilcox include *Camping in the Canadian Rockies* (1897) and *The Rockies of Canada* (1909). PHOTO BY MEGHAN WARD.



hundreds more like it—thus constituted itself in 1857 in the image of a learned society. Its well-heeled members read peer-reviewed papers about their deeds at club meetings, and these were subsequently printed in its journal, not inconsequentially sub-titled “a record of mountain exploration and scientific observation.” Publication established a mountaineer’s claim to a particular ascent; for just as priority was a matter of prime concern and debate in science, so it was in mountaineering.

Publication served another necessary function. In the sciences, a shared ethos was elaborated and maintained through journals. The same can be said about mountaineering, which, unlike most sports, had neither a centralized body to formulate the “rules of the game” nor a system of refereeing to enforce them. Mountaineering was characterized by a series of complex, tacit rules (or “ethics”), which were recognized, sustained and debated in an emerging literary genre of journals, guidebooks and monographs. Of course, not all Victorian mountaineers considered themselves scientists. Many weren’t. But it is noteworthy that alpine club culture began precisely when the older tradition of mountain exploration in the pursuit of science evolved into mountaineering as sport. The subsequent spread of club culture around the globe and the development of mountaineering practices thus gave rise to an immense body of literature.

Accordingly, in 1906, the Alpine Club of Canada constituted itself with, in the very first instance, a claim of science: “the promotion of scientific study and the exploration of Canadian alpine and glacier regions.” And the Club’s inaugural volume of its journal

heralded the call for both book donations and a library: “A movement is now on [sic] foot to obtain a suitable building at a suitable spot, where these valuable books, maps, and photographs may be placed to the best advantage.”



Members heard the call. What began in 1907 as “seventeen volumes, the majority [of the] valuable works relating to the Canadian Rocky Mountains” is now one of the largest collections of mountain literature in North America. And its collective value far exceeds that of any book appraiser’s estimate. Its worth is immeasurable; for at our fingertips is a 100-year-plus snapshot of the dreams and accomplishments of those who’ve found solace and reward—scientific, romantic or athletic—in the high places of the world.

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Thompson’s Narrative of the Explorations in Western America, 1784-1812, compiled by J.B. Tyrrell, was published in 1916.



Left: The ACC Library contains a mix of young and old. PHOTO BY MEGHAN WARD.



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