

RISK ON THE ROCKS:

*Modernity, Manhood, and Mountaineering in Postwar British Columbia*¹

CHRISTOPHER DUMMITT

IN *INTO THIN AIR*, an account of his 1996 expedition to Mount Everest, journalist Jon Krakauer describes a situation that, despite taking place at the highest point on earth, is nonetheless familiar. Upon reaching the mountain's summit and spending the usual few minutes taking photos and admiring the view (rarely as spectacular as it ought to be), Krakauer, wary of his rapidly decreasing supply of bottled oxygen, hurries to descend to the South Summit 250 feet below, where a full oxygen tank waits. Without the extra oxygen, he fears that he might not make it back alive. However, just as he is about to attach himself to a fixed line by which he will rappel down Hillary's Step, he is forced to stop. A large group of climbers at the bottom of the ridge is preparing to ascend the same rope. He is stuck. He cannot get down. In one of the most remote places on earth, with only a tiny amount of supplemental oxygen left, physically and mentally exhausted from reaching the summit, and with storm clouds gathering above, Krakauer waits in line.²

This dangerous return to such basic problems of human interaction just at the moment when one feels most removed from them is characteristic of mountaineering. Like many mountaineers, Krakauer climbs the mountain as a form of escape from the drudgery of daily run-of-the-mill existence. He seeks the isolation of the highest point on earth to find something intangible and to achieve something unique. To do this he must rely on technology (bottled oxygen) and forms of rational

¹ Much of this article is based on the records of the British Columbia Mountaineering Club. I owe a special debt of gratitude to Michael Feller, the current holder of the club's archives, who kindly allowed me into his home on a number of occasions in the autumn of 2001. For their helpful comments on earlier versions, thanks also to Tina Loo, Bob McDonald, Juliet Sutcliffe, and the *BC Studies*' two anonymous reviewers.

² Jon Krakauer, *Into Thin Air: A Personal Account of the Mount Everest Disaster* (London: Macmillan, 1997).

organization (teams of paid guides) that ultimately frustrate his initial desires. He may have travelled to the highest point on earth, but he may as well have gone to the mall because he still has to wait in line like everyone else.³ In this case, however, the consequences are not just being late for dinner: they are deadly. Of the five other climbers in his party to reach the summit, four will die. In radicalizing these tensions – between the desire to escape certainty and the simultaneous insistence on forms of rational planning that frustrate this desire – mountaineering is an icon of modernity, setting into clear relief its promises and perils.⁴

While the basic conflicts of modernity and mountaineering remain constant, their historical meanings change. In *Into Thin Air* Krakauer addresses issues especially significant in the 1990s: the effects of commercialization on the purity of sport, on local cultures, and on the environment.⁵ When we change our historical and geographical focus, the issues change too. In post-Second World War British Columbia, discussions among mountaineers revealed tensions in attitudes towards modern life that were similar to, but ultimately quite distinct from, what came later or before. Members of the British Columbia Mountaineering Club (BCMC) frequently concerned themselves with two significant issues of postwar modernity: what to do about the increased desire for outdoor leisure by a burgeoning middle class and how to best find a place for men in a suburbanized and white-collar world. Although a concern with outdoor leisure and its ability to rejuvenate manhood was not

³ The main reason Krakauer is on the mountain, as a journalist to tell the story of these commercial expeditions up Everest, is also implicated in this sense of premature denouement.

⁴ Mountaineering is an iconic modern activity. Although its historians like to begin their books by citing premodern climbers, these are exceptions; its actual history begins in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Along with developments such as the expansion of mercantile capitalism and overseas exploration, mountaineering was one of the activities that helped create a positive connotation, as something dynamic and stimulating, to the word “risk.” See Anthony Giddens and Christopher Pierson, *Conversations with Anthony Giddens: Making Sense of Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998). Mountaineering historians who cite premodern examples include Walt Unsworth, *Hold the Heights: The Foundations of Mountaineering* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1993); and Chris Jones, *Climbing in North America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

⁵ In the rest of the book, Krakauer shows us, the reader/voyeur-adventurer, the many problems that plagued both this expedition and Everest expeditions in general: the lack of trust between climbers who are fellow customers rather than friends; the degradation of the environment caused by the build-up of garbage and human waste on the mountain; the transformation of the traditional lifestyle of the Sherpas, the local inhabitants who are the guides on most Everest expeditions; and the disastrous effect of business pressures on trip leaders’ judgment when dangerous circumstances threaten not only reputations but also lives. Krakauer is not out to attack mountaineering. He is a longtime climber who respects the sport. But it is hard for him (and readers) not to conclude that the modernization of mountaineering – the effects of commercialization and too much deceptively safe technology – sent the sport reeling off on a dangerous course, which, in this case, ended tragically.

new to the postwar years, the novelty lay in the context.⁶ The postwar years represented the high point of modernity in Canada. What had been only promises of prosperity and scientific progress before and during the war increasingly became realities afterward, especially for those white middle-class Canadians (the majority of BCMC members) able to buy their own homes and move to the suburbs.⁷ In writing and speaking about their desire to leave the city and go to the hills, these mountaineers revealed a great deal about their attitudes towards modernization, suburbanization, and masculinity.

In this article I make two main arguments, one relating to mountaineering's connections with postwar modernity and the other about its relation to middle-class masculinity. My first argument is that Vancouver's mountaineers exemplified the contradictory and transgressive nature of the modernist project at mid-century.⁸ They sought to escape from, and yet were inherently part of, a modernist ethos of risk-management, rationality and "newness." In the postwar years, this contradictory tendency revealed itself around their discussions of the intrinsic uniqueness of wilderness and its relation to that newly dominant feature of Canadian life, the suburb. The BCMC represented mountaineering as an escape from what was becoming an increasingly suburban existence in British Columbia's Lower Mainland. As much as Canadians embraced suburban life as never before in these years, they did not do so without worrying about the consequences. Suburbs, critics warned, brought isolation, a loss of community, and an enervating existence in the in-between land that was neither city nor country.⁹ These problems all seemed to find their solution in mountaineering: against the loss of community came the creation of a new community of mountaineers; instead of isolation, climbers found camaraderie and meaningful friendships; the semi-naturalness of lawns

⁶ Other historians have noted the connection in many contexts, including, for example, baseball (Colin Howell, *Northern Sandlots: A Social History of Maritime Baseball* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995]) and hunting (Tina Loo, "Of Moose and Men: Hunting for Masculinities in British Columbia, 1880-1939," *Western Historical Quarterly* 23, 3 [2001]: 296-319; Lisa Fine, "Rights of Men, Rites of Passage: Hunting and Masculinity at Reo Motors of Lansing Michigan, 1945-1975," *Journal of Social History* 33, 4 [2000]: 805-23).

⁷ On the dominance of the modernizing vision (as well as for a counter-narrative to this vision) in postwar British Columbia, see Arn Keeling and Robert McDonald, "The Profligate Province: Roderick Haig-Brown and the Modernizing of British Columbia," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 36, 3 (2001): 7-23.

⁸ See John Jervis, *Transgressing the Modern: Explorations in the Western Experience of Otherness* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999).

⁹ On criticism of suburbanisation, see Doug Owram, *Born at the Right Time: A History of the Baby-Boom Generation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), chapter three; and Veronica Strong-Boag, "Home Dreams: Women and the Suburban Experiment in Canada, 1945-1960," *Canadian Historical Review* 72:4 (1991): 471-504.

and parks was replaced with the rugged wilderness of mountains; and the enervating nothingness of white-collar work paled in comparison with life and death decisions on the way to the summit.

In rushing to escape some of its problems, however, mountaineers did not really turn their back on modern life. BCMC members may have believed that wilderness leisure offered a more authentic experience, but they also insisted on modifying and controlling this experience in ways that showed they shared much in common with other postwar modernizers. As much as they celebrated the wholeness of the wilderness experience, they also established a modern system of regulating nature, other mountaineers, and themselves. The BCMC set itself up as the arbiter of appropriate conduct in the bush, establishing rules of etiquette to better police the barrier between wilderness and civilization. As with Krakauer on Everest, they sought contradictory goals with predictably mixed results. In seeking an alternative to the artificiality which they saw in modern life, mountaineers were part of a process of modernization that brought the same tension between authenticity and artifice with them into the mountains. The mountaineers' desire to set nature apart as something unique and unspoiled went hand in hand with their desire to then regulate and mediate the (socially constructed) authenticity of their environment.¹⁰ They set up the boundary between wilderness and civilization only to take pleasure in its penetration.

This emphasis on escaping and embracing modernist values is a hallmark of ideas about modern manhood. Wilderness has often been the preferred source of solace for those – from nineteenth-century doctors treating neurasthenia to the young Teddy Roosevelt – trying to maintain assumptions of a primal and powerful masculinity.¹¹ At the very moment when men seem to be most at the centre of modern life, their power is often explained as a throwback to an earlier time, as rooted in a tradition that blends past and present power. The initial popularity of mountaineering in Victorian England and Canada resulted from this notion that masculinity was threatened by modernity and needed to be retrieved in natural and imperial endeavours, preferably ones that

¹⁰ On a similar process at work in early twentieth-century conservation efforts, see Tina Loo, "Making a Modern Wilderness: Conserving Wildlife in Twentieth-Century Canada," *Canadian Historical Review* 82:1 (2001): 92–121. On this process as related to modernity more generally, see Jervis, *Transgressing the Modern*, 134–56.

¹¹ See Patricia Jasen, *Wild Things: Nature, Culture and Tourism in Ontario, 1790–1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 105–32, and Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 170–215.

fostered competitiveness.¹² In the postwar years, the threatened manhood thesis focused on the alleged plight of the middle-class suburban white-collar father. Critics warned that suburban existence, which in other instances might have been seen as the pinnacle of success for the male breadwinner, actually represented a threat to masculinity. Magazines and books fretted over the henpecked man in these feminine spaces, with their lives dominated by concerns over children and neighbourliness.¹³

My second argument in this article is that this threatened manhood thesis expressed itself and found its antidote in the language of mountaineers. In the 1950s and 1960s, the BMC was less likely to link mountaineering with the notions of national, military and racial greatness that had so marked earlier periods. Mountaineering continued, however, to offer middle-class men a version of masculinity connected with possibilities of control and power. On the peaks, mountaineers still maintained control but this came through the regulation of one's body and environment. This was a personalized power of discipline and desire tied to the creation of individual expertise. Much like masculinity more generally (which, as historians Michael Roper and John Tosh point out, always needs to be proven), mountaineering was a test.¹⁴ Succeeding on this test meant not only becoming a good mountaineer, it also meant becoming a modern man.

MOUNTAINEERING IN POSTWAR VANCOUVER

The first Canadian mountaineering organizations were established in the early years of the twentieth century. They came fifty years after the so-called "Golden Age" of (English) mountaineering between 1854 and the disaster on the Matterhorn in 1865. And they came more than a decade after British and American climbers had, with the help of the Canadian Pacific Railway's Swiss guides, claimed a number of first ascents of Canadian mountains. In 1906 the Alpine Club of Canada (ACC) was formed by A.O. Wheeler (at the instigation of Elizabeth Parker) in

¹² On the role of gender and national identity in creating an interest in mountaineering, see Peter H. Hansen, "Albert Smith, the Alpine Club, and the Invention of Mountaineering in Mid-Victorian Britain," *Journal of British Studies* 34 (July 1995): 300-24; Hansen, "Confetti of Empire: The Conquest of Everest in Nepal, India, Britain and New Zealand," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42:2 (2000): 207-332; and Raymond Huel, "The Creation of the Alpine Club of Canada: An Early Manifestation of Canadian Nationalism," *Prairie Forum* 15:1 (1990): 25-43.

¹³ Mona Gleason, *Normalizing the Ideal: Psychology, Schooling and the Family in Postwar Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 53.

¹⁴ Michael Roper and John Tosh, "Introduction: Historians and the Politics of Masculinity," in *Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain since 1800*, ed. Roper and Tosh, (London: Routledge, 1991), 18.

order to ensure that Canadians could claim their fair share of first ascents on Canadian mountains. In the era of empire building, mountaineering served as one more way of expounding identity, conquering new territory, and, as historian Peter Hansen argues, bolstering ideas of national and imperial masculinities.¹⁵ It was in the context of these concerns over exploration and national “firsts” that the BCMC was established in 1907. Although it went by a provincial name, the BCMC was made up largely of Vancouver-area climbers.¹⁶

The early nationalism of climbing had faded by the post-Second World War era. While some still spoke of conquering mountains, postwar BCMC climbers only occasionally explained their actions in terms of national or civic pride. As we will see, however, mountaineers still connected their sport with masculinity, but this was a masculinity that sought escape in the experiential advantages of wilderness leisure. Along with other clubs, including the Vancouver section of the ACC, the Varsity Outdoor Club (based out of the University of British Columbia), the Vancouver Natural History Society, and (in the late 1960s) the Simon Fraser University’s Mountaineering Club, the BCMC promoted outdoor leisure as the perfect salve for the scars of modern life.

Clubs like the BCMC played an important role in shaping the experience of mountaineering. The BCMC brought people and experience together to meet, socialize, and, most importantly, climb mountains. It served as a gathering body of local climbers. Before the advent of guidebooks and a large system of marked trails, clubs provided prospective climbers with much needed information.¹⁷ The club almost doubled in size in the postwar years, going from 150 members in 1945 to almost 300 in 1970. As well, the number of official club trips expanded each year between 1945 and 1970. In the 1940s the club organized trips approximately every other weekend, although members often went on non-club trips as well. By the late 1960s the number of club trips had more than doubled, and a club member could attend one (or more) organized activity every weekend. Members visited a photo shop in downtown Vancouver that was owned by another BCMC climber and signed up for club trips on

¹⁵ Huel, “The Creation of the Alpine Club of Canada”; Susan Leslie, “In the Western Mountains: Early Mountaineering in British Columbia,” *Sound Heritage* 8, 4 (1980); Hansen, “Albert Smith, the Alpine Club,” and Hansen, “Vertical Boundaries, National Identities: British Mountaineering on the Frontiers of Europe and the Empire, 1868–1914,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 24, 1 (1996): 48–71.

¹⁶ The BCMC first went by this name in 1909 after initially being called the Vancouver Mountaineering Club.

¹⁷ “Interview with Esther and Martin Kafer,” Oral History Project (hereafter OHP), 1997, in *British Columbia Mountaineering Club Archives* (hereafter BCMC), box 9, vol. 10.

a register. While there they could also sign up for the regular training sessions in ice- and rock-climbing or the annual summer camp. A monthly newsletter, the *BC Mountaineer*, brought everyone up to date with all the club's activities. It published lists of upcoming climbs and social events, reports of previous trips, club business, and miscellaneous articles and anecdotes. The newsletter also kept members up-to-date on who had married whom, a relatively common occurrence (especially in the 1950s). Overall, BCMC represented a tightly knit community of climbers that grew considerably in these years.¹⁸

Part of the group's cohesiveness came from the relatively similar class positions of its members; the BCMC was a middle-class organization. While historians of BC mountaineering and BCMC members themselves refer to the club as being more casual and open than the ACC, the difference was one of tone rather than kind.¹⁹ Statistics on the class position of members from three different decades (1949, 1959, and 1969) show that a majority of members always belonged to the middle class. The BCMC was made up of professionals like university professors, doctors, and engineers as well as small businesspeople and white- and blue-collar managers. Working-class members usually occupied skilled and semi-professional positions such as lithographer, technician, and teacher. Certainly the club was not exclusive. A few members had unskilled jobs, working as labourers or drivers. But these climbers always made up only a small minority of the overall number of climbers. Perhaps most telling is who was absent from the club. Very few climbers worked in forestry or on the waterfront, two of Vancouver's major industries. And those who did work in such industries tended to do so in skilled or management positions.²⁰

¹⁸ Statistics are culled from information published regularly in the postwar years in the *BC Mountaineer*.

¹⁹ Leslie, "In the Western Mountains."

²⁰ The statistics on BCMC members' class positions is based on the divisions outlined in Michael Zweig, *The Working-Class Majority: America's Best Kept Secret* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2000). Zweig assesses class position based on power over production rather than income. Checking BCMC members names against city directories for three different years (1949, 1959, and 1969, respectively), the following class positions emerge: 1949 = thirty-five middle-class and twenty-two working-class positions (of which eleven involved skilled workers); 1959 = forty-two middle-class and twenty-one working-class positions (of which seventeen involved skilled workers); and 1969 = fifty-eight middle-class and thirty-eight working-class positions (of which thirty-one involved skilled workers). In each of these years, the number of members for whom I could determine class position is less than the overall membership. Other historians of mountaineering note the upper- and middle-class status of its participants; see Sherry B. Ortner, *Life and Death on Mount Everest: Sherpas and Himalayan Mountaineering* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Hansen, "Albert Smith, the Alpine Club"; and Unsworth, *Hold the Heights*.

The location of climbers' homes followed the trends of Vancouver's middle class. Those members who did live within the City of Vancouver disproportionately lived on the affluent west side. Increasingly in the 1950s and 1960s, BCMC members moved away from the city altogether and into the suburbs. In 1949 less than one in six BCMC members lived in the suburbs, compared to one out of two or three in 1969. Adding to this general trend of suburbanization was the large number of climbers who lived in areas of Vancouver that, although inside the city limits, nonetheless closely resembled suburban communities.²¹ With their majority middle-class membership and their increasingly suburban lifestyles, BCMC members were those who, in the postwar years, were most able to benefit from postwar affluence. They were also, as we shall see, those most keen to escape its environmental and gendered ambiguities.

Civilization and Wilderness

The natural environment sought by Vancouver mountaineers underwent dramatic changes in the postwar years. In 1945, British Columbia was still a collection of regions mostly isolated from each other by geographical barriers, united in name only. While transportation links such as railways, ferries, and roads had been breaking down these provincial barriers for quite some time, the process was slow. "For many British Columbians of mid-century," notes historian Jean Barman, "the province as a geographic entity simply did not exist."²² Yet this isolation quickly came under attack in the 1950s and 1960s, especially with the election of the Social Credit party under W.A.C. Bennett. Seeing as his mandate the economic development of the province (particularly its interior regions), Bennett promoted infrastructure as the main tool of development. Picking up from where earlier governments had left off, Social Credit embarked on a massive program of infrastructure development that included highway expansion, the extension of the provincial railway (the Pacific Great Eastern), and bridge-building. It emphasized breaking down barriers between the economically underprivileged regions of the Interior and the better-off areas of Vancouver and southern Vancouver Island.²³ All

²¹ BCMC members' residence information is based on comparisons between membership lists published in the *BC Mountaineer* and city directories.

²² Jean Barman, *The West beyond the West: A History of British Columbia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 271. On earlier processes of transportation development that broke down barriers of time and space in the region, see Cole Harris, *The Resettlement of British Columbia: Essays on Colonialism and Geographical Change* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1998), 161-93.

²³ See Barman, *The West beyond the West*, chap. 12; John R. Wedley, "A Development Tool: W.A.C. Bennett and the PGE Railway," *BC Studies* 117 (1998): 29-50; Stephen G. Tomblin, "W.A.C. Bennett and Province-Building in British Columbia," *BC Studies* 85 (1990): 45-61.

of these developments tended to diminish the barrier between civilization and wilderness and to reduce the distance between mountains and streets.

This infrastructure development not only led to industrial growth but also facilitated an expansion in the numbers of tourists visiting the province's wilderness areas for recreation. The postwar "good life," so popular with Bennett and many British Columbians, included more leisure time spent in the wild. The era saw the emergence of the forty-hour work week as the standard in many industries. This meant that more workers had more time in which to pursue their leisure out of doors.²⁴ Increased ability fitted in nicely with increased desire. A range of family experts, both academic and popular, encouraged postwar families to spend more time together on "fun" outings. In the era of "togetherness" fathers were expected to spend more time with their families. They were not, however, to break down expectations of gender difference between men and women. Spending time outdoors, whether camping, fishing, picnicking, or even in the backyard having a barbecue, became an acceptable way for men to spend more time with their families while still asserting that, because such activities occurred out of doors in the "wilderness," they were acceptably masculine.²⁵

Throughout the postwar years, BCMC members expressed contradictory views on the shifting relation between city and mountain life, which was accelerated by these changes. Should they welcome the new highway up to Mount Seymour or should they see it as something that would destroy their privacy? Would it open up the hills to new mountaineers and to a more respectful attitude towards the wild or would it bring in the wrong kind of nature lovers, those whose only use for trees was as scenery to be viewed from the car window? On the one hand, the club wanted to control this crossing. Trips needed rational planning and care. From this perspective, building roads and expanding facilities made sense; it made getting to the mountain easier and encouraged more wildlife recreation. On the other hand, mountaineers wanted to cross over into wilderness

²⁴ On the general acceptance of the forty-hour work week as standard, see *Hours of Work in Canada: An Historical Series* (Ottawa: Economics and Research Branch, Canada Department of Labour, 1971).

²⁵ Robert Rutherford, "Fatherhood and Masculine Domesticity during the Baby Boom: Consumption and Leisure in Advertising and Life Stories," in *Family Matters: Papers in Post-Confederation Canadian Family History*, ed. Lori Chambers and Edgar André Montigny (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 1998), 309-33; "Fatherhood and the Social Construction of Memory: Breadwinning and Male Parenting on a Job Frontier, 1945-1966," in *Gender and History and Canada*, ed. Joy Parr and Mark Rosenfeld (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1996), 357-75; Chris Dummitt, "Finding a Place for Father: Selling the Barbecue in Post-War Canada," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 8 (1998): 209-23.

to get away from civilization. To truly experience the climb meant going beyond the certainty of regulations and roads. It meant completely losing oneself in nature's difference. The club was pulled from both sides. It wanted to explore, to achieve, to go further. Opening up the mountains meant it could go further more easily. It also wanted isolation. It wanted to maintain the exclusivity of the peaks, where being alone in nature provided the meaning that seemed to be missing from life in the city. This contradictory perspective matches what critical theorist John Jervis refers to as the doubled nature of modernity itself – modernity as project and experience. Mountaineers wanted to both erect and penetrate the barrier between civilization and wilderness. Perhaps not surprisingly, they invested great importance in this boundary, seeing in its crossing the nature of mountaineering and (we should add) modernity.²⁶

In 1973 the BCMC helped publish a pamphlet called *Get Back Alive! Safety in the BC Coast Mountains*. The pamphlet was indicative of much of the club's postwar thinking about the wildness of the mountains. *Get Back Alive!* told local hikers that the mountains were not just an extension of the city, not just a playing field consisting of steep hills. On the way up a mountain near Vancouver, civilization seemed so close. It was almost there – around a bend in the road, hiding behind that big patch of cedars. Yet the boundaries between city and mountain life could not be measured by the nearness of road or city. A few thousand feet (a few hundred feet) could transform a rocky outcrop from a scenic view into a place to die. After leaving the highway or getting off the ski-lift, the mountaineers warned, it is only a short distance before “you cross, probably without noticing the change, the line between civilization and wilderness. Easy access breeds a false sense of security and, for the unwary, the crossing of this invisible line often means going from safety into danger.” The differences between home and away needed to be acknowledged and respected. “Mountains are rough and violent places, where humans are mere specks of potential fertilizer on their flanks.”

A good mountaineer was humble before this great divide between the routines of human comfort and the whims of unpredictable nature. “Humans are soft and vulnerable animals,” they warned. “A falling pebble or a slight stumble can kill the strongest man.” And those who needed warning were often not the strongest men. Postwar life, with its family cars and roadside picnics, had opened up the forests and hills to many people who did not recognize their own softness. The North Shore

²⁶ On modernity's contradictions in this regard, see John Jervis, *Exploring the Modern: Patterns of Western Culture and Civilization* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998); and Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, 2nd ed. (New York: Penguin, 1988).

mountains, the peaks overlooking Vancouver and within just a short drive of downtown, killed more than a few who trundled up their slopes, especially in the fall and spring when sunny days turned into cold, rainy nights. It was so easy to get lost, to go down the wrong path, to slip on a rock and slide down to a part of the mountain you did not know and from which you could not escape. Not that you would think this when you headed out. It would only be a short jaunt – a little healthy exercise in the city’s steep backyard. So many others managed to climb and hike without incident. More and more trails traversed the mountainsides. The highway up to Seymour had just been paved. The local ski slopes were installing lifts. The mountains were so accessible, so civilized, so safe.²⁷

Some in the BCMC fretted over the consequences of opening up the wild areas too much, and to the wrong sorts of people. Longtime BCMC member R.A. Pilkington lamented the extension of the highway to Seymour in 1951. “I cannot help feeling that in giving the mountain to the public the government is taking it away from the mountaineers,” he wrote in the *BC Mountaineer*, the club’s monthly bulletin. “Part of the joy of mountain climbing is to be in the unspoiled high places away from ... the presence of people. That is why it is worth while to struggle up a mountain instead of strolling in Stanley Park ... Let no one think for a moment that I am opposed to progress. The general public has as much right to be dirty in the mountains as upon the beaches ... But to some of us who knew the mountain twenty years ago it seems rather a pity.”²⁸

As more and more Vancouverites came to the North Shore mountains in the postwar years, the club’s mountaineers increasingly sought their leisure elsewhere. The BCMC may have been among those pushing for greater local wilderness protection and promotion, but when the newcomers arrived, the BCMC left.²⁹ The club owned two cabins on the North Shore, one on Grouse and the other on Seymour. Many social activities, including the annual turkey dinner, took place at the cabins that served as gathering places and starting-off points for local climbs. As road access to the mountains improved (allowing club members to go up for a day and return the same night) and as more locals came to the mountains (increasing the number of break-ins and hiking and skiing

²⁷ Quotes from Tim Kendrick, ed., *Get Back Alive! Safety in the BC Coast Mountains* (Vancouver: Federation of Mountain Clubs of British Columbia, 1973), 4.

²⁸ “A Personal Opinion,” R.A.M. [Pilkington], *BC Mountaineer*, (May 1951).

²⁹ As promoters of wildlife conservation, the BCMC seems typical of other mountaineering organizations. See PearlAnn Reichwein, “‘Hands Off Our National Parks’: The Alpine Club of Canada and Hydro-Development Controversies in the Canadian Rockies, 1922-1930,” *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 6 (1995): 129-55.

traffic) the cabins declined in importance. Members stayed there less frequently, and the club decided to sell the Seymour cabin in 1962 and the Grouse cabin in 1965. Contemporaneous with this abandonment, the club began to build new smaller huts in more remote locations. Instead of being social gathering points, these new huts served as bases from which to launch further exploratory trips. And they were, at least initially, much more isolated.³⁰

BCMC climbers thirsted for isolation and novelty. They fetishized “firsts” – the first ascent of a peak, the first trip up a new route. In their desire for virgin climbs, postwar mountaineers blended older imperial ambitions of conquest and exploration with modernist desires for ongoing advancement and progress. British Columbia was one of the few places left that offered many new climbs. Most peaks in other parts of the climbing world, especially Europe, had already been climbed. The opportunity to be the first (or even the second) to the top was lost. In their later lives, BCMC climbers recalled this as one of the best aspects of local climbing – the ability to be the first person to ascend a peak. The mountains were not always high or very difficult, but they had not yet been climbed. And a first ascent also meant the opportunity to name a peak. Names had to be cleared through the government, but the possibility of naming provided a thrill. Ralph Hutchinson’s recollections are typical of those of most serious BCMC climbers: “I could see all these mountains, you know, stretching all the way down Pitt Lake, and I was asking the knowledgeable ones, ‘What’s that one called?’ and they said, ‘It’s not got a name.’ ‘Has it been climbed?’ ‘Probably not.’ And so this was the major interest from then on, was on the unclimbed peaks.”³¹ The possibility that such mountains had already been named by British Columbia’s First Nations did not seem to occur to Hutchinson. This was a colonialism of silence, not so much devaluing First Nations peoples outright as simply not considering their presence at all.

Some mountaineers from other places looked down upon what they believed to be the amateurism of BC alpinists. Postwar climbing in the United States had turned to the open face of the mountain, seeking more and more difficult routes to the top, no longer satisfied with the easiest or most direct. The same process is central to mountaineering writ large. With fewer unclimbed peaks, mountaineers turned to

³⁰ On the cabins and huts, see Minutes of the British Columbia Mountaineering Club for appropriate years in *BCMC*, box 8, file 1-3; and look to interviews with Dick Chambers, Esther Kafer and Martin Kafer, and Irene Apps and Jack Apps in *OHP*, *BCMC*, box 9.

³¹ “Interview with Ralph Hutchinson,” *OHP* in *BCMC*, box 9, vol. 9; and “Interview Esther Kafer and Martin Kafer,” *OHP*, *BCMC*, box 9, vol. 10.

improved technique and new routes to satisfy their need for firsts.³² In this context, the BC climbers appeared to be out of date. Yet really they were just climbing to the local context, taking their firsts as others had done before. The desire for novelty was the same in both places. By the later 1950s and early 1960s, BCMC climbers also sought the more difficult ascents. They spoke derisively about “tourist routes,” frowning upon the less challenging approaches, referring to them as mere “slogs.”³³

By desiring the isolated mountain and valorizing that which had not yet been tried, however, mountaineers created a dilemma for themselves. They sought the isolated place only to end its isolation. Their desire to get to new places gave them a sometimes ambivalent attitude towards the mechanisms – roads, planes, industry – that eventually ended that cherished newness. Pilkington may have lamented the building of the highway to Seymour, but others in the club had lobbied hard for it. They wanted the easier access to the cabin that a good road provided. Without the modern encroachment on wild areas, through aerial survey maps and photographs and logging and mining roads, many BCMC trips would not have been possible. The *Climber's Guide to the Coastal Ranges of British Columbia* (for which BCMC members had given much information) provided information on the reliability of government maps and the usefulness of logging roads.³⁴ The technology of transportation significantly helped mountaineering exploration in British Columbia. One BCMC climber saw the coming of the bush plane after the Second World War as a major impetus for the sport.³⁵ At the club's 1970 turkey dinner, members watched a film on the provision of a drill site in the Yukon. The *BC Mountaineer* ignored the impact that such a development would have on the natural environment and instead noted that the film gave members some good ideas about potential snow-climbing trips.³⁶ Of course the club did not always ignore the potential environmental consequences of industrial development. It lobbied for wilderness protection and against the logging of many wilderness areas. Its desire to gain access to the bush, to always go where no one had gone before, however, created potential tensions. The best a mountaineer could hope for was to always be at the front of the exploration machine, enjoying the fresh unspoiled view before giving it up to the reaping mechanism that came behind.

³² For some American climbers' thoughts about BC climbers, see Chris Jones, *Climbing in North America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

³³ “Interview with Ralph Hutchinson,” BCMC OHP in BCMC, box 9, vol. 9.

³⁴ Dick Culbert, *A Climber's Guide to the Coastal Ranges of British Columbia*, 2nd ed. (Vancouver: Alpine Club of Canada, 1969 [1965]).

³⁵ “Interview with Esther and Martin Kafer,” OHP in BCMC, box 9, vol. 10.

³⁶ “Turkey Dinner,” *BC Mountaineer* ([month unknown] 1970).

The BCMC presented itself as an ideal organization to help police human incursions into the mountains. This desire to regulate and to impose systems of order marked the modernity of mountaineering, the point where the desire to get away showed itself also to be a civilizing mission. When the climbers went to the hills, the modernist project went with them. After setting up wilderness as something distinct from humanity, they then went about reinforcing and guarding this distinction. Dangers came in a variety of forms including the possibility of stranded and injured hikers and despoiled, litter-ridden mountainsides. To combat this problem, the BCMC worked to create a system of trails that would mediate the spaces where humans and wilderness met. A lack of public trails, it argued, caused many of the hiking accidents that Vancouverites read about in their papers each year. The growing popularity of hiking (and the Lower Mainland's growing population) meant that more inexperienced climbers were heading to the hills, and some were ending up in well publicized mishaps. BCMC members became directly involved in such accidents in their work with the Mountain Rescue Group, a volunteer organization of local climbers meant to help the police and military with accidents in the mountains. The new hikers did not always treat the wilderness in the way the BCMC might have preferred. They left garbage, destroyed sensitive wildlife, and presented a danger to others. After a death on Seymour in 1970, BCMC executive member Dr. Joyce Davies wrote to British Columbia's minister for recreation and conservation to impugn his government for its lack of funding for trail construction: "Similar tragedies have occurred in the past and most certainly will occur in the future unless action is taken to remedy the deplorable conditions which prevail."³⁷

The club did not wait for provincial government funding. By the time of Davies' letter, the BCMC had already been seriously building trails for more than a decade. It hosted trail-building weekends, where members volunteered their time to clear and mark trails. In 1963 the BCMC and other local outdoor groups came together to form an organization that became the Mountain Access Committee. Many of the trails in British Columbia, and especially the Lower Mainland, owe their existence to the work of this committee. The club also helped to create a guidebook to mountaineering in the coastal ranges of British Columbia as well as a guidebook to local trails. Both these books served (and continue to serve) as important tools for local amateur hikers.³⁸ While most mountaineers

³⁷ E. Joyce Davies [secretary to BCMC] to Hon. W.K. Kiernan, Minister of Recreation and Conservation, 27 November 1970, *BCMC*, box 1, file 30.

³⁸ For the club's involvement in trail construction, see various entries in "Hut and Trail Construction," *BCMC*, box 9, vol. 45.

wanted to escape the regularity of trails, they also believed that trail construction would ensure that the wild areas would remain relatively unspoiled.

While club members claimed that danger came from unwitting members of the public crossing the boundary from civilization into wilderness, this did not mean that they themselves did not want to cross this boundary. Nor did it mean that they did not bring with them their own notions of civilization. The BCMC, older members especially, often emphasized the importance of mountaineering etiquette. It published lists of rules and commandments, some of which were humorous, but all of which demonstrated a belief in a set of rules for the bush. One of the worst, and most common, infractions involved climbers who dislodged rocks and debris onto those below them. A club trip to Mount Shuksan in 1956 was cut short by another group of climbers who “seemed not to be hindered by any considerations for the ones who were there already.” The *BC Mountaineer* reported how the disrespectful climbers overtook the BCMC group, whose members were soon “busy dodging rocks of all sizes which were coming down in increasing numbers. Helga got hit and let go one of those blood curdling screams which knocked the leader almost off his feet and which would have put to shame any Hollywood stuntman. Fred and Arnold had barricaded themselves behind an enormous wall of ice and refused to leave their fortress, so after a hurried long-distance (3 ropes) consultation with the leader they decided to turn back to camp from that point. They had of course to wait another 2 hours before the air was clear.”³⁹ This may have been a remote location, but the danger came from its occupation rather than its isolation.

Leadership provided one of the main ways to foster appropriate mountaineering behaviour, at least among your own group if not among others. When the BCMC went on climbing trips, the leader always went first and the endman (the second in command) came last. The leader was in charge. He (almost invariably a he) decided the route, the timing, and when the club would turn back. In practice, this was not a rigid hierarchy. Poking fun at the leader’s troubles was one of the fun things to do on a trip, especially when later writing up the report of the trip. When Jim Addie followed his lecture on snowcraft techniques at the Grouse Mountain cabin with some practical demonstration, the *BC Mountaineer* felt duty-bound to report that “the leader’s insistence that his followers follow in his exact footsteps in true mountaineering style seemed a little unreasonable when some of his footsteps took him up

³⁹ “Mt. Shuksan, Sept. 1,2,3, 1956,” BCMC, box 3, file 27. See also, “Editorial,” *BC Mountaineer* (August 1956); “The Mountaineer’s Ten Commandments,” *BC Mountaineer* (March 1960).

to his neck into rotten snow.” Another report suggested ways to endear yourself to the leader: “Every few minutes ask the leader if he knows where he is going. Try to elbow past him and reach the peak first. When he has the rope wrapped around twice and tied in four knots about the stoutest tree on the mountainside, be sure to ask him if it is safe.” The joking put a human face on the hierarchy: mountaineering was, after all, supposed to be fun. Behind the joking, however, lay a belief that a mountaineer’s experience of the wilderness should be mediated by clear organization and lines of authority.⁴⁰

The BCMC often turned back to people and civilization at the very moment when something went wrong in the wilderness. This is a key theme in modern acts and stories of exploration – whether these be mountaineering tales or episodes of *Star Trek*. They are as much about what is left behind as they are about what is sought. And the BCMC’s discussion of mountaineering risk was no different. Mountaineers sought to go to places where others had not gone and to get there by routes that others had not taken. Yet the risks they faced – and the reasons they were willing to face them – tended to diminish the distance between themselves and others. They wanted to escape the petty restrictions of everyday life, yet if trouble came they suggested rules, organization, and more knowledge (i.e., less mystery) as the solution. Despite (or, more accurately, because of) the uncertainty of the distinction between wilderness and civilization, the club emphasized it all the more.

Expertise and Excitement

This process of turning away from civilization and then, almost surreptitiously, turning back towards it again matched postwar ideas about the state of modern manhood. Men were presented as occupying both a threatened and a powerful position. In one sense, postwar affluence allowed middle-class men to feel more secure in their role as family breadwinner. And yet security had its drawbacks: suburban domesticity and white-collar work were not the stuff of rugged, active men. Even if sociologist William Whyte’s criticisms of the “Organisation Man” were addressed to Americans (especially the concerns about competitiveness and the frontier), he could still find a receptive audience among Canadians who were also concerned that suburban life robbed men of their natural vigour. Sociologist Michael Kimmel argues that postwar men were caught in what he calls the “Goldilocks dilemma.” They could

⁴⁰ When commenting on BCMC trips in recent years, both Martin and Esther Kafer cited lack of leadership as a serious problem.

be neither too conformist nor too rebellious or wild. Caught in the middle, they increasingly sought “fantasy thrills” through leisure and entertainment. “The more boring and dull the routine of men’s work became,” Kimmel claims, “the more exciting and glamorous were their fantasies of escape.”⁴¹

BCMC discussions of their sport – especially its risky nature – mirrored these doubled-edged concerns over manhood. Mountaineers constructed the nature of their sport in a way similar to that presented in Kimmel’s Goldilocks dilemma. Mountaineers had to achieve a balance between reason, control, and safety on the one hand and emotion, experience, and risk-taking on the other. The BCMC’s discussion of their sport vacillated between these paired concerns: between the thrill of pushing forward against the recklessness of pushing too far, and between the responsibility of knowing one’s limits against the boredom of knowing them too well. In mountaineering, men could make decisions that mattered. Masculinity could continue, in a very potent if fabricated way, to be connected with the power to control bodies – in this case, the mountaineer’s own. The possibility of manly and mountaineering control came in finding the right balance between expertise and excitement.

Although the club was open to both men and women and there were no formal barriers restricting activities of either sex, mountaineering was definitely a gendered sport that privileged men over women. Men dominated the club by sheer numbers alone. There were always many more men than women climbers. More significantly, a climber’s sex could often be an indicator of skill and experience. Women were much more likely to be “graduating” members, those who had not yet completed the required number of full club trips in order to qualify for full membership. In 1949 one in three female climbers was a graduating member compared to one in seven male climbers. Although the relative number of female full members increased over the 1950s and 1960s, the same process occurred with the men.⁴² Such differences in membership details had practical consequences on climbing trips. On a number of club trips, the group divided upon reaching the approach to the summit, with one party taking the most difficult route to the top and the other staying behind or trying an easier ascent. Often, the groups divided by sex, with

⁴¹ Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 236, 251-2; William Whyte, *The Organization Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956). This dilemma is also addressed in Barbara Ehrenrich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (New York: Doubleday, 1983).

⁴² Statistics on sex ratios in the BCMC is culled from membership lists published in the *BC Mountaineer*.

most women staying behind. The same gendering worked in the planning of longer, more ambitious trips. A small group of advanced male climbers tended to dominate these exploratory trips. In this way the division in the club between climbers and hikers, seemingly a division based on skill and willingness to embark upon difficult climbs, also became gendered.⁴³

The same process influenced the operation of the club's executive. Women were much more likely than men to organize the club's social activities, while men planned the climbing activities. The club's Climbing and Ski Committee, responsible for determining when and where the BCMC would climb, did not have a female member until 1967. And it was not until 1971 that a woman, Esther Kafer, became the committee's chair. Kafer's case is illustrative for it shows that, even when female climbers were very advanced, the gendering of skill continued. She later recounted how club members referred to her by the diminutive tag of "girl." When she went along on difficult trips, she was often the only woman. This gendered division between the serious and the casual was not completely rigid. Some women (like Kafer) went on the ambitious trips, earning a special reputation; some men did not engage in serious climbing (or at least not to the same extent as did the most prolific climbers). But this did not stop the gendering of mountaineering expertise. Exceptions proved the rule.⁴⁴

Beyond numbers, the very notion of skill itself was constructed in a way that matched contemporary ideas of what it meant to be masculine. Cool rationality infused the BCMC's idea of mountaineering expertise. Nothing was more important in a crisis than unemotional and unfettered assessment. Eric Brooks told new climbers that good mountaineering required the proper mindset as much as the proper technique. The "true mountaineer" needed refined judgment and experience. He "become[s] cooler and more full of resource when bad weather sets in." He is able to "estimate bearing power of snow with a single thrust of the axe."⁴⁵ To such a man, "panic is the enemy."⁴⁶ Ian Kay argued that mountaineering

⁴³ On trips breaking up see, for example, "Mount Arrowsmith Trip, May 22-24 1954," *BCMC*, box 3, file 27; and "Interview with Jim Woodfield," *OHP, BCMC*, box 9, vol. 12. On the experience of a woman climber in the ACC at a slightly earlier period (an experience that also provides evidence of the gendering of skill), see PearlAnn Reichwein and Karen Fox, "Margaret Fleming and the Alpine Club of Canada: A Woman's Place in Mountain Leisure and Literature, 1932-1952," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 36, 3 (2001): 35-60.

⁴⁴ Women's role as social organizers is apparent in the minutes of the executive for most years and is commented upon in "Interview with Joan Ford," *OHP, BCMC*, box 9, vol. 8. Information on committee members and chairs was published annually in the *BC Mountaineer*. On Kafer, see "Interview with Esther and Martin Kafer," *OHP, BCMC*, box 9, vol. 10.

⁴⁵ Eric C. Brooks, "Snowcraft and Icecraft in Mountaineering," Lecture Course in Mountaineering, 22 March to 26 April 1956, lecture transcripts in *BCMC*, box 8, file 7.

⁴⁶ Kendrick, *Get Back Alive!*

was similar to that other risky modern activity, driving an automobile. In other contexts the BCMC might have eschewed comparisons to such an urban pursuit, but Kay saw through to their mutual demand for rules-based self-discipline. "To drive a car safely we must know the rules of the road, so it is with climbing, we must know the rules of the mountain. A driver that can anticipate conditions is a safer driver than one with a quick reaction, this fact also applies to mountaineering."⁴⁷ This appeal to responsibility and preparedness fit nicely with many elements in the postwar era's political culture, from ideas of containment in the Cold War to the breadwinning duties of fathers. Men, the family experts (and, in this case, mountaineering experts) claimed, needed to be responsible. The language of disciplined mountaineering matched the language of disciplined masculine citizenship.⁴⁸

Discipline called for planning and preparation. Accidents happened when you failed to prepare. In 1958, when the BCMC joined with the Vancouver Section of the Alpine Club of Canada to climb Mount Fairweather to mark the BC centennial, it employed the language of national and martial masculinity. Paddy Sherman, one of the organizers (and later editor of the *Vancouver Province*), compared mountaineering preparation to a military undertaking. The expedition, he noted, had devised its "plans of attack" and had held a "council of war."⁴⁹ More often in the postwar years, however, preparation was more about individual expertise, competence, and responsibility. The *BC Mountaineer* hearkened to this point in the aftermath of a hiking death on the North Shore mountains in 1956. "Rather than acquire knowledge the hard way," it argued, "it is as effective to listen to others and prepare and act accordingly ... Simple uncomplicated preparations that everybody knows about, but so few act upon."⁵⁰ This same outlook inspired the club's involvement in the Mountain Rescue Group. This was a volunteer organization set up by local climbers to assist the police and military in saving stranded climbers. Preparedness was the Mountain Rescue Group's mantra. The members of this group extolled its virtues for the amateur climbers they often had to save. They also believed in its usefulness for themselves;

⁴⁷ Ian Kay, "Safety in the Mountains," Lecture Course in Mountaincraft, 22 March to 26 April 1956, lecture transcripts in BCMC, box 8, file 7.

⁴⁸ On manly responsibility and ethics of citizenship in the Cold War, see Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War* (New York: Basic, 1988); and Robert Griswold, *Fatherhood in America: A History* (New York: Basic, 1993).

⁴⁹ "The First Canadian Ascent of Mount McKinley," *BC Mountaineer* (July 1961). See also press release from Paddy Sherman, 4 May 1944 (incorrectly dated; real date appears to be 1958), in BCMC, box 4, file 11.

⁵⁰ "Lost on Seymour," *BC Mountaineer* (October 1956).

the group's organizers continually tried to maintain an up-to-date list of all those available for rescue operations, emphasizing the need to be prepared.

The members of the BCMC often criticized recklessness. When they spoke to young climbers or the public, they advocated safe and responsible climbing. "The idea," according to the *BC Mountaineer*, "is not so much to get to the top, as to get back."⁵¹ Mountaineering was an exercise in rational risk management. "To every climber comes the moment when he must decide, is this mountain, today, worth my life? If your answer is NO, we will ... be full of respect for the immense powers of destruction attending our every step. If your answer is YES, stop a bit and think of the rescue party that must come if you are injured, spending their time, money and equipment, taking risks for your benefit they would not take for their own pleasure. If your answer is yes, think further: are you worth the lives, time and strength of your friends, your rescuers?"⁵² Here is the reasoned, cautious approach to risk, evaluating options, choosing carefully. In the postwar years, when a range of public figures from psychologists to politicians advocated responsibility as the hallmark of manhood, this aspect of the club's approach to risk would likely have found fertile ground. While club members rarely publicly challenged other experienced climbers' decisions, when they did do so, it was on these grounds. When a 1960 ascent of Mount McKinley ended in tragedy, Paul Binkert claimed that the "accident serves as another reminder to climb always with a feeling of responsibility." He quoted a line from a *Life* magazine article on the incident: "They suffered the penalties which the mountain inflicts on the weak or the rash."⁵³ The climbers certainly were not weak, so that left rash.

Mountaineers knew of what they spoke; no doubt these attributes did lead to greater safety. Their very instrumentality and the context within which they were made nonetheless reinforced connections between masculinity and expertise. Calls for an unemotional and unornamented approach to risk carried gendered implications. Many scholars have noted the way the language of modernity has been gendered. Masculinity has, for much of the modern period, been connected with reason and essence, while femininity has been connected with emotion and ornament. To focus on anything but the instrumentality of a situation has often meant to lose sight of its essence, to give in not only to danger but also to

⁵¹ "The Mountaineer's Ten Commandments," *BC Mountaineer* (March 1960).

⁵² "The Climbing Code," partially reprinted from the Seattle Mountaineers monthly paper *The Mountaineer*, in *BC Mountaineer* (August 1953).

⁵³ "Mount McKinley," *BC Mountaineer* (July 1960).

emasculatation and femininity. The BCMC's description of mountaineering danger picked up on this longer history and, in emphasizing the divisions between recklessness and responsibility, gave it meanings particular to its sport in the postwar years.⁵⁴

Club members and the press both used and reinforced these notions of masculine expertise when they evaluated the cause of accidents. In late June 1952 the twenty-nine-year-old BCMC climber Vera Taylor suffered a near disastrous fall on a club trip to Holy Cross Mountain. According to the *BC Mountaineer*, Taylor and some other "girls" were being shepherded down the mountain on a rope between "experienced climbers." "Part way down, Vera Taylor, apparently growing tired of this slow method of progress, left the rope and attempted to glissade," a technique whereby a climber slides on her bottom to cover long distances at greater speeds, using her ice axe as both a break and a steering mechanism. Taylor lost her axe and lost control, bowling over someone else who tried to break her fall, before finally coming to a rather violent stop against an outcrop of boulders. She was still unconscious when the report was being written twelve days after the incident. Like many who suffered serious injury, Taylor later returned to climbing. In the interim, the club and the press referred to her youth and femininity in explaining the incident. At the next BCMC executive meeting, the club claimed that the Taylor accident should serve as a warning for young and old alike. The young needed to respect and obey trip leaders, and the older experienced climbers needed to take the mantle of leadership seriously. The local papers contrasted Taylor's femininity (articles in both the *Sun* and the *Province* began with almost identical sentences, reporting that she was young and attractive) with the skill and experience of the male rescue workers who brought her out of the bush. Taylor was not alone in being unfavourably compared to the male rescue workers. Many of the young men who found themselves stranded on local mountains each year suffered the same fate. The papers emphasized the Mountain Rescue Group climbers' experience, skill, and determination at the same time as they told of how the climber in trouble had failed to take the necessary precautions. The expert mountaineer served as an ideal against which those involved in accidents could be compared.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Dorothy Hodgson, ed., *Gendered Modernities: Ethnographic Perspectives* (New York: Palgrave, 2001); Jervis, *Exploring the Modern*.

⁵⁵ On the Taylor accident, see Minutes of the British Columbia Mountaineering Club for 1952, BCMC, box 8, file 1-3; "Holy Cross, June 28-29th," *BC Mountaineer* (July 1952); "City Woman Injured in Mountain Plunge," *Vancouver Province*, 2 July 1952, 17; "Mountaineers Rescue Girl," *Vancouver Sun*, 2 July 1952, 1.

In practice, however, whether on a weekend club trip up the Lions or on an expeditionary venture into the far reaches of the province, BCMC climbers often treated danger a little more light-heartedly than they suggested when talking to the press or giving instruction to young climbers. So long as everything turned out all right in the end, so long as no one ended up in hospital, they laughed at rocks falling from above or at a slip on the cliff face. Enduring these tribulations made mountaineers special. R.A. Pilkington's short mountaineering poems provide the typical flavour:

A boulder bounding off an alp
Landed on poor Willie's scalp
Rotten luck! But anyhow
Willie is broad-minded now

or

George fell down a deep crevasse
He's in cold storage now, alas
His mother's ailing, sad to tell
But George is keeping rather well⁵⁶

A little fall was good ammunition for campfire jokes or reports to the bulletin. Jim Teevan's friends seemed to enjoy ribbing him after an eventful trip up the Tomyhoi in 1948. "It will be a trip that one of our party will long remember," they reported to the *BC Mountaineer*. "Someone knocked loose a rock from above a small bluff. The rock hit Jim Teevan on the side of the face and he received a cut which required four stitches from the First Aid man. Five minutes later Jim started to sit down on a ledge and his feet went out from under him. A slide over rock and snow for about fifty feet resulted and back we went to the First Aid man to have Jim's scraped arm bandaged. If he intends to use up our First Aid Kit this fast we shall have to charge him double rates."⁵⁷ Mountaineers often faced minor incidents like the ones experienced by Teevan. They dealt with the recurrences by poking fun at them, minimizing their significance.

Club members did not want to be injured, but they wanted to climb and they knew that climbing involved danger. They went ahead with it and took risks. By 1961 a Canadian team had yet to climb Mount McKinley, North America's highest peak. A BC team, including climbers

⁵⁶ R.A. Pilkington, "Mountain Literature," *BC Mountaineer* (September 1951).

⁵⁷ "April 18th - Rock Slide," *BC Mountaineer* (May 1948).

from the BCMC, decided to make an attempt. The 1961 expedition to Mount McKinley had all the elements of a classic mountaineering story: a remote mountain, an attempt to achieve the first Canadian ascent, risks taken, hardships endured, and, in the end, success. To achieve this success, the climbers suffered severe hardships. Two climbers lost a number of toes to frostbite and had to be emergency airlifted off the mountain. Serious hospital treatment and physical therapy followed. The press wanted to know if they would climb again, to which BCMC member Jim Woodfield replied: "Climb again? I jolly well hope to." And he did. So did Ralph Hutchinson, another BCMC climber who lost toes on the McKinley expedition. With a new, adjusted boot, he was back climbing the next year.⁵⁸

The BCMC's ambivalence towards danger – cautious one moment, carefree the next – came from the way it sought to play with the contradictions of risk and modernity. Experience of risk is risk's ultimate arbiter: one can only judge the risk-taker by engaging in risk oneself. In its emphasis on doing and experiencing, mountaineering bridged the divide between the 1950s fears of excessive rationality and bureaucracy, on the one hand, and the more radical 1960s critics of the dehumanizing effects of the "system," on the other. Mountaineers were not (necessarily) radicals, but, especially for men, their interest in climbing came, in part, out of the way it spoke to these concerns.⁵⁹ It offered a powerfully meaningful (if artificially constructed) life and death experience that postwar critics claimed was absent from most middle-class men's lives. In an article entitled "So You Climb, Do You?", Jim Woodfield tried to answer the question of why a mountaineer climbs. It is a question that climbers often faced and claimed to find frustrating. To ask why one would climb implied that you could not possibly understand.⁶⁰ Woodfield went through – and rejected – several stock responses: "Because I enjoy it – open to question: because it is good for me – priggish: because I want to – avoids the question: because of the pride in achievement – sounds a bit pompous: because struggle is good for man – sounds Marxist." External concerns did not define the mountaineer; rather, the true

⁵⁸ On the McKinley expedition, see "McKinley Climb Worth the Pain of Frostbite," *Vancouver Sun*, 8 June 1961, BCMC, box 4, file 29; "The First Canadian Ascent of Mount McKinley," *BC Mountaineer* (July 1961); and interviews with Ralph Hutchinson and Jim Woodfield," OHP, BCMC, box 9, vol. 9 and 12.

⁵⁹ See Owram, *Born at the Right*, 204–10. Although Owram notes the romanticist and experiential critiques of the 1960s, he too readily downplays its connection to earlier movements (such as the beat movement and existentialism); he fails to see how such criticisms are structured into the very process of modernity itself.

⁶⁰ On the frustration of mountaineers having to face questions about why they climb, see Leslie, "In the Western Mountains"; and Ortner, *Life and Death on Mount Everest*.

importance of mountaineering lay beyond ego and risk, in the realm of meaning. Woodfield offered an existential answer to why he climbed. In a modern world so fast-paced and open to change, mountaineers found meaning in the simplicity of mountaineering. Climbing offered a primal experience. It “[frees] the fettered soul of civilized man so that he can rejoice in the primeval silence of a great forest, and hear the joyful lullaby of a spilling stream, or know tranquillity atop a mountain as he absorbs the breadth of valley, ridge and peak unfolding in disappearing array to the mysterious horizon.” Woodfield pitied those who had never climbed and who therefore had never known “the deeper satisfaction which so outweighs the strain of a pack-in, that reduces all rigours of element or nature to insignificance, that teaches a person to value the permanent truths of life.”⁶¹

This embrace of primary experience, and the stoicism it engendered, originated not only in mountaineering experience but also in postwar gender relations. In the context of fears about the emasculating effects of urban and suburban life on contemporary manhood, mountaineering provided a meaningful salve to notions of modern masculinity. Mountaineers endured danger, they left the city, they went out into the wilds just as many in the postwar period believed that men had always done. Norman McKenzie, UBC president (and former member of the Massey Commission), highlighted the sport’s enriching potential in modern life when he argued that mountaineering “gave its followers a chance to get away from the undesirable influences of city life.”⁶² The club itself offered the same arguments, suggesting that climbing, like hunting and fishing, offered a healthy outlet for youthful energy and thus acted as a deterrent to juvenile delinquency.⁶³ BCMC members often jokingly questioned why they kept up with climbing. Early mornings and rainy days seemed to inspire such doubts. “On being roused from the down warmth of his sleeping bag at 1:30 a.m. and sent forth into the darkness with a half-cooked and hastily eaten breakfast lying soggily on his stomach,” one climber reported to the *BC Mountaineer*, “the most ardent mountaineer may perhaps be excused for wondering if he shouldn’t take up golf.”⁶⁴ Yet it was just this version of manhood – the golf-playing, suburban father – against which mountaineers defined themselves. Paul Binkert used the stereotype of suburban man to jokingly

⁶¹ “So You Climb, Do You?” *BC Mountaineer* (March 1959).

⁶² Report of Speech by Dr. Norman McKenzie, *BC Mountaineer*, (May 1951).

⁶³ “Brief to the Royal Commission on Forests for the Province of British Columbia, 1955,” *BCMC*, box 1, file 8.

⁶⁴ “Mount Shuksan, Aug. 31, Sept. 1-2,” *BC Mountaineer*, (December 1946).

chastise those who did not climb. In a mock biblical/prophetic tone, he wrote of those who made excuses not to go climbing, those who had “to cut their lawn, to paint their houses, to wash their windows.” Such people should repent, Binkert wrote: “Ye are no longer worthy to call yourselves mountaineers for whilst you are squatting here, gaining weight and losing agility the mountains are still out there waiting in their eternal beauty for the worthy ones.”⁶⁵ By accepting the risks of their sport, by venturing out of the city, mountaineers adopted an alternate version of masculinity to that of the “Organization Man,” that stereotype of postwar manhood pilloried by so many.

Recurrences

BC mountaineering changed in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In 1967 the BCMC began to grade the difficulty of club trips, using a system of numbers and letters. The system first assessed the strenuousness of the climb (from A to C) and then combined this with an assessment of the grade’s steepness and difficulty (from 1 to 4).⁶⁶ This marked a greater interaction between local climbers and the systems of organization and classification more widely used in the North American and European mountaineering world. It represented a movement away from making first ascents of unclimbed peaks and towards calculating more difficult treks up those mountains that had already been climbed. It increasingly called on climbers to head to the open face of the rock itself. When commenting on the changes in mountaineering, BCMC members later spoke of specialization and the decline of the wilderness mountaineer. According to the individual mountaineer, such a process could either be seen as an important step in the professionalization of their sport or as a slip-up that led to the loss of some intangible wholeness.⁶⁷

Although BCMC members understood these changes within their local context, such a transformation is endemic to mountaineering’s history. From the sport’s earliest origins, we can trace a change from wilderness mountaineering (in which half the battle was simply getting to the base of the mountain) to more specialized mountaineering (better serviced by transportation routes and technology and with a focus on specific aspects such as rock or ice climbing). In her introduction to accounts of early BC mountaineering, Susan Leslie’s perspective is typical of that

⁶⁵ “Paul Binkert,” *BCMC*, box 4, file 36-7.

⁶⁶ Minutes of the British Columbia Mountaineering Club, 1967, *BCMC*, box 8, files 1-3.

⁶⁷ This conflict between specialization and totality is one that Freud put at the beginning of his discussion of the effect of civilization on the individual. See Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: WW Norton, 1961).

of many postwar mountaineers. She celebrates the progress made in the past, the many first ascents. At the same time, she also mourns the loss of novelty and the environmental costs of growing human leisure in the wild. This contradictory celebration and mourning of progress is not tied to any one historical period. Already in the late nineteenth century, a group of German climbers called for a more pure mountaineering separate from the large military-like expeditions so popular among the English.⁶⁸ The conflict between authenticity and artifice, between purity and corruption, has been endemic to mountaineering. Whether we are discussing postwar British Columbia, Victorian England, or the late twentieth-century Everest expeditions, mountaineering, like the larger process of modernity of which it is apart, pushes forward – both destroying and mourning that which it leaves behind.

In each particular era, however, mountaineers have given historically specific meanings to this conflict. In postwar British Columbia, mountaineering found meaning as a solution to the dilemmas of suburbanized middle-class masculinity. In mountaineering, men found a way to blend the rugged and the respectable in order to solve Kimmel's Goldilocks dilemma.⁶⁹ It called on men to be daring risk-takers, to engage in a dangerous activity in which their decisions actually mattered. At the same time, they were also expected to be responsible risk-managers, carefully planning and preparing for every eventuality, developing a sophisticated expertise about how to survive in the mountain wilderness. The BCMC defined manhood and the ideal mountaineer in a double way: as that which was at the heart of rational, rules-based modernity (the engineers, scientists, and, in this case, expert mountaineers) and as that which served as modernity's opposite (the primal and experiential traditional man). The solution lay in finding the proper balance. Calling upon traditions of masculine authority from the past and claiming manly ability to control the risks of the future, mountaineers constructed a stable masculinity in the present.

The manifestation of this balance was inextricably linked to the mythology of progress that reigned supreme in the postwar years. Gendered notions of manly risk-taking and risk-management emerged in tandem with widespread support for the modernist project. Many in the BCMC wanted to protect wildlife and the natural environment; they wanted to

⁶⁸ Leslie, "In the Western Mountains." On the German search for a more authentic climbing experience, see Unsworth, *Hold the Heights*, chap. 7.

⁶⁹ Although this debate between rough and respectable is usually discussed in terms of class (see Roger Horowitz, ed., *Boys and Their Toys: Masculinity, Technology and Class in America* [London and New York: Routledge, 2001]), the presence of this debate in a relatively homogeneous middle-class organization suggests that we need to look beyond the material relations of production for an adequate explanation.

conserve wilderness. They also, however, shared a gendered belief that put manhood at the centre of modernity, both in the need to escape its hollowness and in the ability to control its risks. In their understanding of risk, mountaineers showed themselves to be true modernists. They offered the creation of expertise as the solution to the danger that they faced. Like other modernists, from nuclear scientists to car safety experts, this was a limited form of expertise that never questioned the belief in progress, or in achieving more “firsts.” What was needed was refinement, a better tuning of the machine. The risks mountaineers faced on the rocks may have seemed at some remove from industrial modernization, but the shared language of modern manliness meant that the mountaineers had much more in common with the boosters of the province’s postwar modernization than they might have cared to admit.