

"BEING A GIRL WITHOUT BEING A GIRL":

Gender and Mountaineering on Mount Waddington, 1926-36

KAREN ROUTLEDGE

I LIVE IN A CITY SHAPED BY MOUNTAINS. I first realize this while standing on top of one. It is 8:00 AM on the summit of Mount Baker, a Cascade volcano just south of the American border. The summer morning is already scorching; snow glitters and melts at my feet. I am looking at the region where I have spent most of my life, but it has become another planet: alien, stunningly beautiful, yet somehow familiar. The view is dizzying; there's so much light, so much heat, so much air. All around me, peaks are stacked upon peaks, layers of paling blue fading into the sun-bleached sky. The sight of all this land at once is overwhelming. I know this place but not like this. Ironically, while Mount Baker's snow-capped plateau is a prominent landmark to Vancouverites, the city is utterly insignificant from here. Vancouver lies buried somewhere to the northwest, a squat grey mass in a valley of haze and smog, a sprawling city limited by mountains in three directions. I look down at this map made real before me and finally understand the extent to which geography shapes the way we live. The mountains that surround Vancouver are far more than landmarks, sources of income, and tourist beacons. We have changed these mountains and been changed by them. From their slopes and summits, countless city people have glimpsed not only their home from a different perspective but also their own lives, values, and priorities.

This article is about two of those people whose lives have been changed by mountains. Eighty-four summers ago a group of Vancouver mountaineers stood where I did, on the summit of Mount Baker, and looked out at much the same scene. Although the city was smaller, the glacier larger, and the crevasses opened in a different pattern, the crumpled land stretched out before these climbers in much the same way as it does today. Mount Baker was, of course, a much less accessible

destination then, but this particular trip proceeded smoothly until the descent, when a man's footing gave way above a steep slope of loose rock. Immediately, instinctively, a woman in the party jumped below him in order to break his fall. She herself began to slide, by which time the man had steadied himself; he reached out and stopped her. This couple barely knew each other, yet both appreciated that they had found someone on whom they could rely in an emergency and felt that they shared a special instinctive connection.¹ They continued to climb together nearly every weekend, and a year later they were married. Together, they would explore large areas of the Coast Mountains, frequently travelling and climbing for weeks in isolated areas. Their lifelong devotion to each other and to the mountains, combined with their similar desire for adventure, would make Don and Phyllis Munday (née James) two of the most renowned mountaineers in Canadian history.

History itself is often about looking at familiar places from distant, unfamiliar vantage points. In this article I travel through words up into the Coast Mountains. From here, I discuss Phyl Munday's experience of being a woman on climbing expeditions overwhelmingly dominated by men. In order to get to the tops of mountains, Phyl Munday often had to step outside the boundaries of acceptable middle-class womanhood and challenge contemporary notions of what was possible for a woman. Through her actions she contested both the feminine domestic stereotype and that of the masculine mountaineer. Her presence on the expeditions fundamentally questioned what it meant to be a woman, and climber, and, by extension, a man.

The fact that Don, Phyl, and their friends thought Mount Baker would be an enjoyable place to spend a long weekend reflects that, by 1919, mountaineering had become a recognized and relatively popular pastime in Canadian cities.² Around the turn of the twentieth century, a small group of Vancouver climbers had begun to explore the local peaks of the Coast Mountains. From 1906 and 1907, respectively, the Vancouver Section of the Alpine Club of Canada (ACC) and the British Columbia Mountaineering Club (BCMC) provided meeting and learning places for Vancouverites who went hiking and climbing in the mountains

¹ Don Munday, *The Unknown Mountain* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1948), 1-2.

² The desire to climb distant and unknown mountains is no more "natural" than is the desire to avoid them. As late as 1750 most Europeans considered mountains to be "Nature's Shames and Ills," "Warts, Wens, and Blisters" on the smooth face of the earth. See anonymous source quoted in Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite* (New York: Norton, 1963), 2. One of the more accessible books on the development of European mountaineering is Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Knopf, 1995).

on weekends and holidays. While these clubs officially represented a cross-section of Vancouver society, in practice their members tended to be middle class, of British descent, and employed in office jobs that were neither physically strenuous nor full of risk. Women made up a significant portion of the membership – approximately 40 per cent in the case of the ACC – but they were far less likely than men to participate in extended, unguided mountaineering trips.³

Don and Phyllis Munday were active club members before meeting each other, but they did not greatly diverge from the stereotypical climber profiles until after their marriage and the birth of their only child, Edith, in 1921. In 1923 they accepted positions as resort managers of a proposed development on Grouse Mountain and moved first to a tent and then to a cabin they built on the mountain. When the resort failed to materialize, Don and Phyl moved to North Vancouver, where they lived until close to their deaths. After their marriage, neither of them held a long-term job that was not related to outdoor activities. Don was a freelance journalist who wrote largely about climbing, and Phyl – as well as being a housewife and mother – was a devoted volunteer in the Girl Guide Movement and the St. John's Ambulance Society.⁴ The Mundays were also very enthusiastic members of the ACC. They regularly attended club meetings, where they often gave lectures about their trips. Phyl sat on the ACC executive, helped to plan social events, edited the local newsletter and the *Canadian Alpine Journal*, lobbied for various club interests, and judged photo contests. Outdoors, she and Don

³ For exact membership figures, see PearlAnn Reichwein, "Beyond the Visionary Mountains: The Alpine Club of Canada and the Canadian National Park Idea, 1906-1969" (PhD diss., Carleton University, 1995), 368. Siri Louie notes that, while the official ACC policy was one of gender equality, reality consistently fell short of this goal. See Siri Winona Louie, "Gender in the ACC, 1906-1940" (MA thesis, University of Calgary, 1996). To be fair, very few male Vancouver climbers were serious mountaineers either. However, the only female climber who came close to Phyl Munday's intensity of climbing – indeed, the only other woman who appears to have led any routes of substance or made major ascents – was Emmie Milledge Brooks. Emmie was known locally for her smoothness and dexterity as a rock climber. She was the third woman to summit Mount Robson, led the first all-woman ascent of Mount Garibaldi, and went on an exploratory trip into the Tantalus Range with Neal Carter. See Susan Leslie, ed., *In the Western Mountains: Early Mountaineering in British Columbia* (Victoria: Aural History Program, 1980), 50-1.

⁴ Phyl worked as a stenographer before marrying Don. See Kathryn Bridge, *Phyllis Munday: Mountaineer* (Montreal: XYZ Publishing, 2002), 146. This book also provides far more detail on Phyl's life. Don presumably held jobs before the First World War, but he does not record what they were. During the Second World War he signed up to work in the North Vancouver shipyards after being rejected by the service. I suspect that, after marriage, the couple's income was supplemented from another source, possibly an inheritance from Phyl's side of the family and/or Don's war pension. While Don sold a fair number of his publications to American magazines (Glenn Woodsworth, personal correspondence), it is doubtful that this would have provided even a frugal family with enough income to purchase a house in North Vancouver and raise a daughter.

led day or weekend trips and climbing seminars, and went backcountry skiing with their club friends in the local mountains.⁵ Phyl stopped her serious exploratory climbing after Don's death in 1950, but she remained a committed ACC member until she died in 1990.

To mountaineers the Mundays are best remembered for their exploratory trips to the Mount Waddington region, a few hundred kilometres north of Vancouver. At 4,019 metres Mount Waddington is the highest mountain in southern Canada, and it is a renowned and challenging mountaineering destination today. However, when the Mundays first looked out towards Mount Waddington from a viewpoint up the Homathko River in 1925, they were astounded by what they saw. While the mountains in this area must have been important and obvious to local people, the Geographical Survey Board had not yet mapped the region, and therefore urban mountaineers were unaware of its topography. The Mundays became determined to reach this mountain and climb it.

Don and Phyl spent seven of the eight following summers on the glaciers surrounding Mount Waddington. They mapped the area, photographed it, gave names to its mountains, and made first ascents of many of the region's higher peaks. Yet, despite repeated gruelling attempts to climb the mountain itself, they never reached its main summit. Ironically, their failures made them famous. Mount Waddington repeatedly made the front pages of Vancouver newspapers, and the Mundays' accounts were published in mountaineering journals, newspapers, and magazines in Canada, the United States, and Britain. The Mundays' stories and stunning photographs – such as this oft-reprinted image of the summit (see Figure 1) – drew top local and international mountaineers to this “unclimbable” mountain. Mount Waddington became the most coveted summit in North America until an American team, Fritz Wiessner and William House, climbed it in 1936.⁶ Nevertheless, it is the Mundays who remain most associated with the region today, and the duration, isolation, and technical nature of their early expeditions easily rank them among the most dedicated and intriguing mountaineers in Canadian history.

⁵ References to the Mundays doing these activities are sprinkled throughout the ACC Vancouver Section's newsletters. See “Avalanche Echoes,” Newsletters, 1906–50, AC 0 111, White Museum of the Canadian Rockies Archives, Banff.

⁶ Wiessner had learned to rock climb in the Alps and made use of more modern technology and techniques than did Vancouver climbers. He and House made liberal use of pitons on the final pitches of Mount Waddington – equipment which the Mundays considered “unsporting.” Wiessner and House also had twelve-point crampons and carried rope-soled shoes for the difficult rock sections. For an account of their ascent, see Chic Scott, *Pushing the Limits: The Story of Canadian Mountaineering* (Calgary: Rocky Mountain Books, 2000), 113–16.

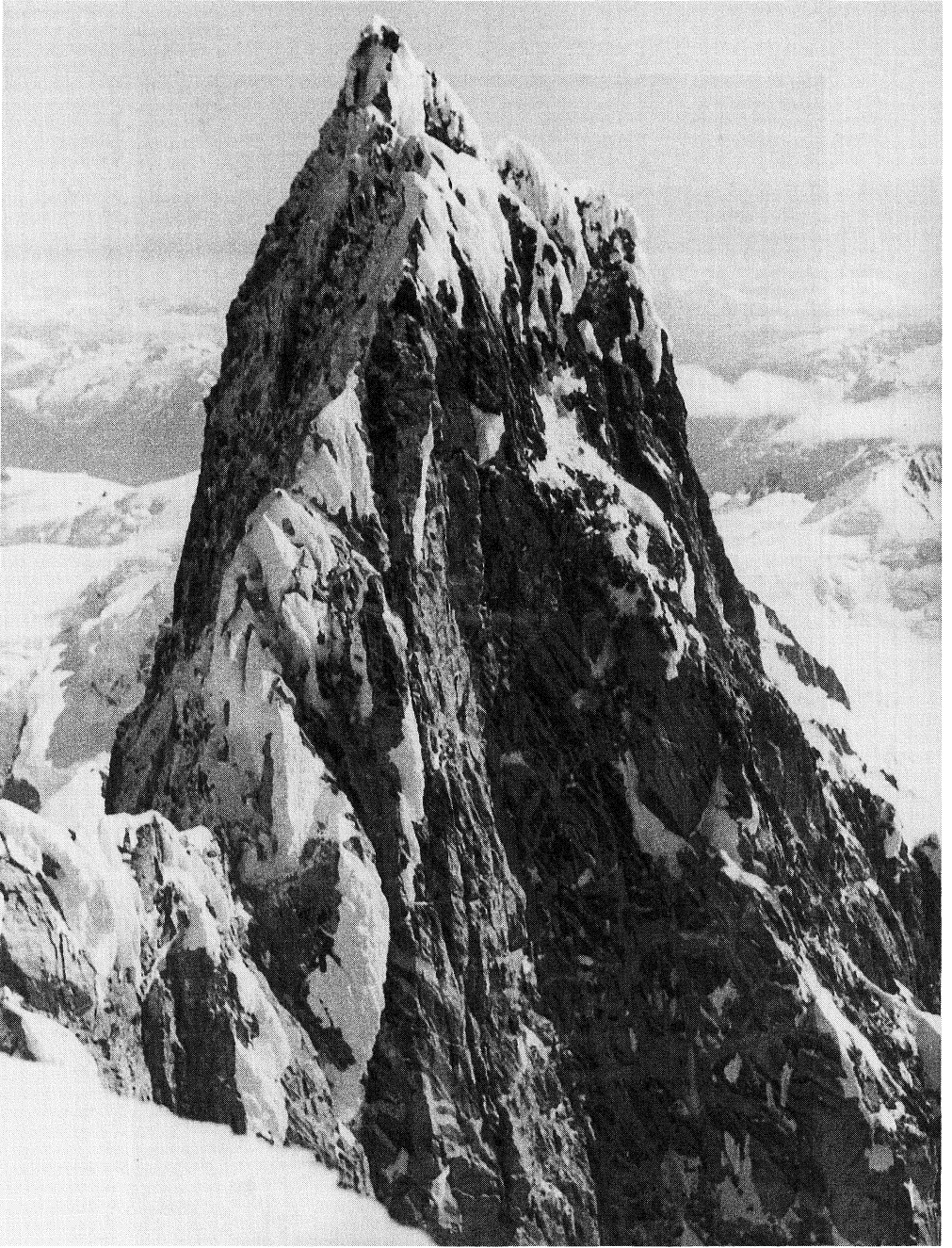


Figure 1. The summit of Mount Waddington. Before 1936, articles often reprinted this image as convincing visual evidence that the mountain was “unclimbable.” (P. Munday, “The Middle Summit of Mount Waddington,” [1934?], Online Photo #1-51584, BC Archives).



Figure 2. Phyl Munday crossing Scar Creek while Don holds the rope. (Bert Munday, "Don Munday holding tight rope for his wife Phyllis as she crosses Scar Creek," 1926, Online Photo #1-51587, BC Archives).

A PLAYER OF TWO GAMES:
 PHYL MUNDAY AS WOMAN AND CLIMBER

Anyone planning a trip to Mount Waddington, in the 1930s would have heard of Don and Phyl Munday. Renowned American climber Henry Hall certainly knew of them, and when he stopped in Vancouver in 1933 en route to Mount Waddington he was lucky enough to run into Don Munday on the street. Henry immediately invited the Mundays to join his expedition, presumably hoping their expertise would increase his chances of success. His group was set to depart in two days, so Don and Phyl spent their Sunday in a blur of packing and preparations. On the steamer to Squamish on Monday morning, Henry confessed that he would not normally have invited a woman on such an arduous trip. However, he had seen a photograph (see Figure 2) of Phyl crossing Scar Creek in the 1927 *Canadian Alpine Journal*. It convinced him that Phyl was a woman for whom exceptions could be made.⁷

Indeed, this photograph reflects the many ways in which Phyl Munday challenged accepted notions of gender through her mountaineering. As Don Munday wrote, a woman such as Phyl could “be a girl without constantly reminding a fellow that she is a girl.”⁸ She was easily among the most proficient Canadian mountaineers of the 1920s and 1930s, and she by no means relied upon her husband to get her to the summit. In this photograph Phyl is wearing men’s clothing and nailed boots, and she is carrying a 60-pound packboard.⁹ This creek crossing was a harrowing experience for all involved, yet she remained calm and competent. This photograph, taken by Don’s brother Bert on Phyl’s third crossing, captures the tenseness of Don and Phyl’s bodies, the foaming whiteness of the creek water, and the waves breaking over the shaking and shifting logs. Here, Phyl is displaying qualities of athleticism, extreme courage, and physical strength not widely associated with middle-class women in the 1920s and 1930s.¹⁰

Yet, what the above photograph does not reveal is the events leading up to it. Phyl did not help build either this bridge or any of the expeditions’ other bridges; instead, she prepared lunch while the men chopped down

⁷ D. Munday, *The Unknown Mountain*, 191.

⁸ D. Munday, “Skyline Lodge,” n.d., p. 146, MS-2379, BC Archives, Victoria.

⁹ D. Munday, *The Unknown Mountain*, 13.

¹⁰ Women’s athleticism was highly controversial in this period, and certainly this view was contested. Yet it remained dominant, especially for middle-class women. On women and athleticism in the 1920s and 1930s, see Susan K. Cahn, *Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women’s Sport* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1994), 8, 82. For more Canadian context, see Ann M. Hall, *The Girl and the Game: A History of Women’s Sport in Canada* (Peterborough: Broadview, 2002).

suitable trees and painstakingly dragged them into the river.¹¹ This division of labour was typical for Don and Phyl. While Phyl clearly contested dominant notions of gender through her climbing, she and Don transplanted traditional gender roles to the mountains and upheld them as much as possible in their daily routines.¹²

Many past and present female mountaineers have overtly linked their climbing to a feminist agenda. While pre-1970s women climbers did not generally argue for a total breakdown of gender roles, there were many who considered their climbing part of a larger quest for women. The suffragist Julia Archibald Holmes climbed in the United States in the mid-1800s and wrote up her accounts in a women's journal dedicated to social reform. In the early 1900s Annie Smith Peck and Fanny Bullock Workman competed for the altitude record for women, making climbs in the Andes and the Himalayas. Workman was photographed in the Himalayas holding up a banner stating "Votes for Women," and Peck wrote that she was a "firm believer in the equality of the sexes" and hoped that her climbing achievements would "be of advantage to [her] sex." In the 1920s several women climbers, such as Miriam O'Brien, organized all-female expeditions, arguing that this was the only way they would be able to develop their skills as climbers and become equal to men.¹³ Yet Phyl Munday does not fall into this category: she did not consider herself a feminist and refused to discuss her climbing in terms of gender.¹⁴ Her primary goal was not to break down female stereotypes but, rather, to climb mountains. Her sense of self-worth was not just based on her climbing and backpacking achievements but also on living up to her conventional notion of what a woman and a wife should be. As a friend remarked, "[Phyl] was always very much a lady," and she strove to remain so on expedition.¹⁵

¹¹ P. Munday, diary entry, 11 June 1926, MS-2379, BC Archives.

¹² It was not uncommon for women to attempt to transport the domestic sphere to other "fields." Julie Roy Jeffries was surprised to find that pioneer women clung to traditional gender roles even when they were ill-suited to the environment. See Jeffries, *Frontier Women: Civilizing the West? 1840-1880*, 2nd ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), 6. See also Myra Rutherdale, "'I Wish the Men Were Half as Good': Gender Construction in the Canadian North-Western Mission Field, 1860-1940," 32-59, in *Telling Tales: Essays in Western Women's History*, ed. Catherine A. Cavanaugh and Randi R. Warne (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000), 34.

¹³ David Mazel, ed., *Mountaineering Women: Stories of Early Climbers* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1994), 7-12.

¹⁴ Although Phyl was given ample opportunity – in her own writing and due to 1970s reporters asking leading questions – to discuss gender, she repeatedly refused to do so. She dodged all questions about discrimination and her position as a role model for women, asserting that her gender didn't matter and that they were all "just climbers." See, for example, Kathryn Fowler, "To Find 'Their' Mountain: Phyl Munday Recalls the Day She and Don Looked across at Waddington's Tower," *BC Outdoors*, May 1980, 32-6, 64-7; P. Munday, Interview with Susan Leslie (audio recording), 1976, tape 1-side 1, No. T160: 2-3, BC Archives.

In order to better analyze Phyl Munday's role in the mountains, I consider her conflicting woman/climber identities as two games she played simultaneously. The anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner argues that everyone plays a multiplicity of games and that sometimes the rules of these games contradict each other. Any one game is always "incompletely hegemonic." It is in these spaces of conflict between games that there arises the most viable room for change, or what Ortner terms "the slippages in reproduction, the erosions of longstanding patterns, the moments of disorder and outright resistance."¹⁶ Phyl Munday tried to live up to two separate and conflicting ideals in the mountains; she played two games of identity. In the first game, the "women's game," she tried to play the role of the ideal middle-class woman and wife: subordinate, maternal, unassertive, nurturing, supportive, and at home in the domestic sphere.¹⁷ In the second, the "climbers' game," she attempted to become the ideal climber: assertive, adventurous, courageous, strong, stoic, heroic, and at home in the wilderness.¹⁸

Certainly, all identities are relational and shifting, and there is undeniably more overlap and complexity here than these generalized lists of attributes convey. However, it is important to remember that the ideal woman and the ideal climber were in most cases constructed as opposites and defined against each other. Their two games were not generally played by the same person or in the same place. The women's game and the climbers' game also belonged to two opposing fields: the city and the wilderness, respectively. Indeed, a society that constructs binaries such as male-female and nature-culture is not conducive to games that encourage overlap between these extremes. In trying to play

¹⁵ Philip Brock, "Phyllis Munday Obituary," *Canadian Alpine Journal* 74 (1991), 98.

¹⁶ Sherry B. Ortner, *Making Gender: The Politics and Erotics of Culture* (Boston: Beacon, 1996), 17, 20. Ortner is attempting to reconceptualize Bourdieu's theory to better account for change and agency.

¹⁷ I assume that the "women's game" did not change much in the 1920s and 1930s. During this period the feminist movement lost impetus and the image of a "conventionally feminine" woman became entrenched. See Veronica Strong-Boag, *The New Day Recalled: Lives of Girls and Women in English Canada, 1919-1939* (Toronto: Copp Clark Pittman, 1988), 7-33.

¹⁸ The meaning of climbing has obviously changed across time and space. However, these characteristics of the "ideal" climber have changed little since mountaineering's emergence as a sport in the mid-1800s. For a discussion of masculinity and climbing in an earlier period, see Peter H. Hansen, "British Mountaineering, 1850-1914" (Harvard: PhD diss., 1991), chap. 5. Sherry Ortner also deals with similar gendered qualities associated with climbing in her *Life and Death on Mount Everest: Sherpas and Himalayan Mountaineering* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999). Of course, there were and are many ideas about what constitutes an "ideal woman" or an "ideal climber." Nevertheless, there was a dominant middle-class view in Vancouver in the 1920s and 1930s about what a woman should be as well as a dominant view among Vancouver climbers as to what a climber should be. It was these values that Phyl had largely internalized and tried to achieve.

both games at once on expedition, Phyl had to compromise and bend the rules of both of them, thereby deeply challenging notions of gender, whether or not she intended to do so.

"A FESTIVE MEAL OF HAM":
THE WOMEN'S GAME

On one of their earliest exploratory trips together, Don and Phyl spent the first of many days cutting trail through dense forest. The most tedious section involved scrambling through a gully filled with the tall, spindly, thorny bush known as devil's club. The Mundays' ensuing battle with this particular devil's club was typical of their division of labour. It was a joint effort but also a separate one. All day, Don wielded the axe and chopped the trail. That evening, Phyl painstakingly picked the thorns out of his hands and made him remain in his sleeping bag while she repaired the considerable damage to his clothes.¹⁹ "Not only Arctic expeditions need a good needlewoman," Don remarked gratefully.²⁰

Both Don and Phyl played vital and central roles on every expedition. However, their roles were not interchangeable. While the men did much of the heavy work packing loads, Phyl took care of the washing, mending, and cooking.²¹ She explained: "While the boys were doing most of the relaying, I was doing washing and cooking and all sorts of household chores."²² Phyl's tasks were related to those she presumably performed as a wife in the city. There were also practical reasons for this division of labour: Phyl was far more skilled at domestic tasks than any of the men, and they were generally able to carry heavier loads.²³

However, this division was at least in part practical because of socialization, and therefore it also reflected the dominant ideology of distinct male and female spheres. Phyl's special tasks removed her from much direct contact with nature; she was the one who made the expedition comfortable and "civilized." To use the battle imagery favoured by many

¹⁹ D. Munday, "Adventure Trails of BC," n.d., 45, 48, MS-2379, BC Archives.

²⁰ D. Munday, "Ski Adventures in the Coast Range," n.d., MS-2379, BC Archives.

²¹ For examples, see D. Munday, "Adventure Trails of BC," 198-9; D. Munday, "Untrodden Sky Lines," n.d., 219, MS-2379, BC Archives; P. Munday, diaries, 1926/1927/1930/1934, n.d., MS-2379, BC Archives; D. Munday, "Ski Adventures in the Coast Range," n.d., 3, MS-2379, BC Archives.

²² P. Munday, "Old Ways to Waddington," (audio recording), January 1964, no. 4293:1, BC Archives.

²³ Although Phyl frequently relayed loads of upwards of thirty kilograms, this was not as much as Don or the young men could carry. When she was helping to build a cabin on Mount Seymour in the 1930s, she had to "struggle along" up the trail with two heavy boards, while most men were able to manage three. P. Munday, interview with Dan Bowers (audio recording), 1972, tape 1-side 2, no. 1160, BC Archives.



Figure 3. Phyl Munday cooking in camp. (D. Munday, "Phyllis Munday making a meal at base camp," 1926, Online Photo #H-03442, BC Archives).

male climbers of this period,²⁴ Phyl was often behind the lines. The men advanced the expedition, and she made sure they could continue to do so. She replenished their hungry bodies with food; she repaired their equipment and clothing. She was also responsible for treating the many injuries, usually minor, that the climbers incurred.²⁵ She looked out for everyone, especially the weaker members of the party. She insisted that the climbers travel at a slow and steady pace that everyone could manage, and she gave extra food to the weaker climbers, even when it was in short supply.²⁶ Phyl did much of the maintenance work – both physical and psychological – on the approaches.

This image of Phyl cooking in camp in 1926 (Figure 3) shows the extent to which gender roles were both divided and compromised on expedition. Don entitled it, "Mrs. Munday works culinary magic in the kitchen."²⁷ Yet this "kitchen" was certainly different from Phyl's kitchen

²⁴ Mountaineering style owed a lot to the military (Ortner, *Life and Death on Mount Everest*, 217), and climbing was frequently described in military terms of battles and sieges (Peter Hansen, "British Mountaineering," 443). Of course, in the 1920s and 1930s, most male climbers were war veterans, who would tend to look at challenges in military terms.

²⁵ P. Munday, diary entry, 9 July 1933, MS-2379, BC Archives.

²⁶ D. Munday, "Adventure Trails of BC," 219.

²⁷ D. Munday, "New Mountain Horizons in Canada: A Record of Pioneer Exploration of Peaks and Glaciers of the Coast Mountains of Canada, 1925-1928," n.d., 31 of photo section, microfilm 661, BC Archives.

at home in the city. While it is probable that Phyl did not have modern conveniences such as a refrigerator or a washing machine, she likely would have had running water and electricity, and certainly some kind of stove.²⁸ Furthermore, if Phyl pitched this camp – as she might have done – she would have had to cut tent and shelter poles, put up the tents that she had sewn out of sail canvas over the winter, and lash everything together securely. She would also probably have chopped the wood for the cooking fire. Even the camp equivalent of “domestic” tasks required greater strength than most middle-class women needed to cultivate.

Although the Mundays took very few portraits, there are several similar photographs among their thousands of negatives. In two other photos from the 1926 expedition, the male climbers are eating, but Phyl is a blurry figure moving between them, presumably serving them or checking if they have enough to eat.²⁹ She can also be seen cooking, washing dishes, and serving food in the 1934 expedition video.³⁰ These images corroborate Phyl’s descriptions in her diaries of cooking and feeding the party.

This image also reveals the extent of the food and cooking equipment the expedition members had to carry. There are seven or eight pots and pans of various sizes as well as many heavy tins of food. Dried eggs and Klim powdered milk, both visible in the picture, were staples. Similar pictures show cans of margarine, peanut butter, and custard powder. Other important foods included macaroni, pilotbread (dry biscuits), beans, rice, flour, butter canned in tins, various grains and dried fruits, sugar, jam, cheese, ham, bacon, and sardines.³¹ The Mundays also took lots of chocolate, nuts, and raisins – “iron rations.”³² Bannock, or pan-bread, was a crucial food that could be baked in advance and carried onto the glaciers. When the party descended to the forest after its time above the treeline, Phyl could make a special meal with heavier ingredients. On one occasion she made “a festive meal of ham, creamed carrots, fried potatoes, scrambled eggs, custard and strawberry jam.”³³ On another unforgettable evening, she amazed the men by concocting doughnuts.³⁴ As a friend of Phyl’s expressed it, “It seemed that before

²⁸ Strong-Boag, *The New Day Recalled*, 121, 123, 131-2, 136.

²⁹ P. Munday, envelope entitled “1926 expedition – First Attempt at Mystery by Homathko,” 1926, negative box 23, no. 198812-005, BC Archives.

³⁰ D. Munday, “Mount Waddington,” (videocassette), 1936, no. v1987: 31/1-2, BC Archives.

³¹ Cyndi Smith, *Off the Beaten Track: Women Adventurers and Mountaineers in Western Canada* (Jasper: Coyote, 1989), 186.

³² P. Munday, Interview with Susan Leslie (audio recording), 1976, tape 1-side 1, no. T160: 2-3, BC Archives.

³³ D. Munday, “Adventure Trails of BC,” 251, 301.

³⁴ D. Munday, *The Unknown Mountain*, 43.

our packs reached the ground Phyl had a hot malted chocolate drink for all of us. At the end of the hardest days, she would prepare delicious meals from seemingly simple ingredients, and dinner always included an interesting dessert.”³⁵

Finally, this photograph shows off Phyl’s clothing: puttees, knickers, button-up shirt and sweater. Virtually identical to what male climbers wore, some of it was almost certainly men’s clothing. When asked in 1976 about dressing the same as the men, Phyl shrugged off the question, as she did with most questions concerning her gender. “It was just part of your equipment,” she asserted.³⁶ Yet the fact that there are no photos at all of men cooking reveals that even if men and women’s clothes were similar, behaviour on the expedition was less so.

On the approaches to Mount Waddington, Phyl tried to play the women’s game mentally as well as physically. She was unassertive: she allowed Don to choose the campsites and kept quiet when she did not agree with his choices.³⁷ She did not even insist on moving when, in one instance, she correctly surmised that the campsite Don had chosen would flood.³⁸ Clearly, Phyl did not like to contradict her husband, preferring instead to use her diary to express her “unacceptable” opinion and concerns. She wrote in the back of her 1939 diary: “You have not fulfilled every duty unless you have fulfilled that of being pleasant.”³⁹ It appears that she considered this a duty even when it made her unhappy. Once, when she secretly wanted to go home and Don did not, Phyl wrote, “Oh so terribly terribly disappointed not to be going out to stay.”⁴⁰ She proceeded to lament to her diary for much of the following ten days, confiding that she was “dreadfully lonesome,” “awfully blue and homesick,” and that there was “no one friendly,” even though Don was with her.⁴¹ Although Don was likely aware that Phyl was unhappy on this occasion, it does not seem that she voiced her discontent or requested a change of plans.

Phyl also kept quiet about the inner conflict she experienced over her position as a mother. Most Canadian women in the 1920s and 1930s expected to marry and have children, and their motherhood was a vital part of their sense of self-worth as well as a prime determinant

³⁵ Philip Brock, “Phyllis Munday Obituary” in *Canadian Alpine Journal* 76 (1991), 98.

³⁶ P. Munday, interview with Susan Leslie (audio recording), 1976, tape 2-side 1, no. T160: 2-3, BC Archives.

³⁷ P. Munday, diary entry, 11 July 1930, MS-2379, BC Archives.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 2 September 1927, MS-2379, BC Archives. Don’s account: D. Munday, “Adventure Trails of BC,” 270-1.

³⁹ P. Munday, diary entry, 1939, MS-2379, BC Archives.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 20 August 1927, MS-2379, BC Archives.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 24-25 August 1927, MS-2379, BC Archives.

of the respect others accorded them.⁴² Indeed, Phyl was in a particularly unique position as a mother and a sportswoman: the vast majority of female athletes retired from competition after marriage and certainly after childbirth.⁴³ Phyl does not record whether she felt guilty or was criticized for leaving her small daughter with friends every summer, but she certainly missed Edith dreadfully. Most years there is a photograph of Edith pasted into the front of her diary. She hated saying goodbye to her daughter, commented constantly on how much she missed “her baby,” and counted the days until she would see her again.⁴⁴ One night in 1927 she remarked, “Have that terribly tingling feeling again tonight about getting out. Feel terribly lonely for Edith.”⁴⁵ Phyl clearly felt compromised by her dual career as both a mother and a climber, a sentiment that the fathers on the expedition do not express.

Still, while Phyl’s attempts to balance her two identities sometimes made her miserable, she also took pride in her gender-specific skills. She made a point of telling an interviewer that her expeditions always had “nicely cooked” food.⁴⁶ In her diary she often recorded the dishes she made and commented when men complimented her meals.⁴⁷ Phyl was also quick to criticize the few men who tried their hands at cooking. She complained to her diary when she had to eat undercooked macaroni and beans prepared by two men.⁴⁸ On another expedition, when the packers made soup and put egg in it, she commented, “Oh golly what a mixture.” Apparently this concoction made the party members “very wobbly around [the] waist line,” and many were unable to climb well the following day.⁴⁹ Indeed, the expeditions would not have been as well run or as well fed without her. On the first washday of the 1926 trip, Phyl discovered that one of the single male climbers had brought sixteen pairs of socks, intending to throw them away rather than wash them.⁵⁰ By being the only climber with substantial domestic skills, Phyl carved out a unique space and made herself irreplaceable. She was the only Vancouver climber of her era playing both the women’s game and the climbers’ game seriously, and she was proud of this.

⁴² Strong-Boag, *The New Day Recalled*, 11-13, 113.

⁴³ Hall, *The Girl and the Game*, 91.

⁴⁴ See for example P. Munday, diary entries, 15 July 1930, 2 July 1926, 16 June 1927, 5 August 1927, 15 September 1927, 12 June 1928, MS-2379, BC Archives.

⁴⁵ P. Munday, diary entry, 9 August 1927, MS-2379, BC Archives.

⁴⁶ P. Munday, interview with Susan Leslie (audio recording), 1976, tape 1-side 1, no. T160: 2-3, BC Archives.

⁴⁷ P. Munday, diary entries, 10 July 1928, 23-29 July 1931, MS-2379, BC Archives.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 17 August 1936, MS-2379, BC Archives.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 19-20 July 1933, MS-2379, BC Archives.

⁵⁰ D. Munday, “Adventure Trails of BC,” 157.

Phyl, therefore, did not see her “domestic” role as subordinate. However, as appreciative as the men were of Phyl’s abilities,⁵¹ there is evidence that they ascribed a lower status to her jobs. Sometimes the Mundays invited young men in an apprentice capacity. These “boys,” as they were known, learned how to run an expedition and sometimes tackled a few lesser climbs. On three other expeditions the Mundays accompanied the American climber Henry Hall, who hired packers and horses. These packers and the “boys” were enlisted to help with everything, including many of the tasks that normally fell to Phyl, such as cooking and setting up camp. In other words, while male climbers were not expected to perform domestic tasks, the subordinate male helpers were, even if they had no more experience in cooking than the male climbers. This suggests that even though Phyl did not view her role as inferior, the male climbers – consciously or not – considered themselves above the jobs she did. Although Phyl’s tasks were vital and there was nothing inherently degrading about them, the male climbers reflected a prevalent view that Phyl’s chores were “feminine” and of a lesser value than those that they themselves performed.⁵²

Indeed, by transporting the women’s game to the mountains, Phyl reinforced prevalent stereotypes about gender. When she performed “domestic” tasks on expedition, she was conforming to an accepted female role, and her presence exempted the male climbers from learning to do such work themselves. If Phyl had not been there, then the men would have had to cook their own food, mend their own clothes, and do their own laundry – as they must have done on other mountaineering expeditions in the 1920s and 1930s, at least those without packers or guides. Phyl’s presence and willingness to do these tasks allowed men to uphold an ideal of “front-line” mountain travel as a masculine pursuit.

However, at the same time, the women’s game could not be transported to the mountains without its precepts being thrown into question. The nature of the expedition made a certain amount of heavy labour necessary for all participants. Phyl may have done more cooking and less backpacking than most male climbers, but there were very few tasks that she did not perform on the approaches. She relayed loads; she navigated; she chopped trail with an axe; she rowed across

⁵¹ See for example D. Munday, “Adventure Trails of BC,” 215; D. Munday, “Untrodden Sky Lines,” n.d., 255, MS-2379, BC Archives.

⁵² This is in keeping with Leonore Davidoff’s argument that dominant groups generally consider certain tasks to be beneath them and ascribe a lower status to them, even when these tasks are often necessary and not inherently distasteful. See Davidoff, “Class and Gender in Victorian England,” in *Sex and Class in Women’s History*, ed., Judith L. Newton et al., Mary P. Ryan, and Judith R. Walkowitz, (Boston: Routledge and Kegan-Paul, 1983), 18.

choppy seawater. Even Phyl's "domestic chores" on the climbs differed substantially from those at home in North Vancouver. Phyl was clearly stepping outside the boundaries of the city women's game, even if only because the environment demanded it. Furthermore, once the party reached the glaciers, Phyl's performance as a climber offered an even deeper challenge to the premises of the women's game.

"UNFAILING FORTITUDE,
UNFLINCHING COURAGE":
THE CLIMBERS' GAME

"Wind nearly tore us from the slope below the plateau edge," wrote Don Munday after yet another failed attempt on Mount Waddington. "I lowered my wife with the rope across the bergschrund's fragile snow bridge. As it could not be jumped, I slid down, trusting she could anchor me if the bridge broke."⁵³ The bridge held that time. There were other times when it did not, but the Mundays always managed to hold each other. When Don and Phyl were tied into the same rope, their destinies were literally tied together. They worked as a team, playing much the same role. At such times, out of necessity, the climbers' game superseded other games. Any mountaineer would rather have the mythical climber on his rope than the mythical domestic woman. If Phyl was going to climb on serious, unguided expeditions, she had to learn to play the climbers' game. And she did.

Unlike most female – and many male – ACC members of her time, Phyl Munday was a competent leader on rock, ice, and snow. Being first on the rope was extremely risky in the 1920s and 1930s. Climbers were generally careful not to lead beyond their limits, but accidents occasionally occurred: in 1934 on Mount Waddington, a young Vancouver climber slipped while leading a rock pitch and fell to his death.⁵⁴ The accepted mountaineering techniques of the day afforded little protection to the leader, so a fall on ice or rock was often fatal. In general, women did not lead, and many people considered them to be physically and mentally incapable of doing so.⁵⁵

It is questionable whether Don would have allowed Phyl to expose herself to this kind of risk at all, had it not been necessary. Sometimes,

⁵³ D. Munday, "Mystery Mountain' (Mt. Waddington) and Great Glaciers of the Coast Mountains of Canada," n.d., 14, MS-2379, BC Archives.

⁵⁴ Eric and Emmie Brooks, interview with Susan Leslie (audio recording), 1976, tape 1-side 1, no. T3485:1, BC Archives.

⁵⁵ Hall, *The Girl and the Game*, 27.

especially after dark, Don insisted on keeping Phyl in the safer position.⁵⁶ However, Don had been invalided home from the Great War in 1918 after being hit by shrapnel, and the wound had left his left arm clumsy and weak. For the rest of his life, he was unable to lead any technical rock climbs that required him to grab holds with his left arm.⁵⁷ Indeed, abandoning gender roles could be a matter of necessity and convenience as well as personal convictions or desires. Often, the Mundays simply did what they had to do to get where they wanted to go. Still, whether or not Phyl would have learned to lead had it not been necessary, she came to consider leading a natural duty for all climbers, commenting in an interview that “of course” she and Don always alternated leads.⁵⁸ Leading, she observed, was important for developing one’s judgment in the mountains.⁵⁹

Phyl led over glaciers as well as on rock, even though Don’s injury was far less of a hindrance on non-vertical snow and ice. This seems to be a case where Phyl was making active use of the “slippages” between the women’s and the climber’s game to resist gender roles and to create her own identity. Since she climbed almost exclusively with men, she could have done what most women did and simply allowed the men to lead. Yet, according to Don, on at least one occasion she “insisted” on leading “among the worst of the masked crevasses.”⁶⁰ Learning to lead over all terrain must also have been a pragmatic choice for Phyl: her expertise made the expeditions safer. On the glaciers she and Don were able to relieve each other and travel further without becoming exhausted.⁶¹ In one instance Don and his brother became snow-blind and Phyl had to lead them down the glacier.⁶² Another time Don became ill on a descent and Phyl immediately took over leadership. The party could feel “her calm strength,” and, according to one of those present, she saved their

⁵⁶ P. Munday, diary entry, 8 July 1928, MS-2379, BC Archives. Sometimes Don considered the “sharp” (leading) end of the rope to be the safest (e.g., if there was a likelihood that the leader would dislodge a lot of rock onto the heads of those below). See P. Munday, diary entry, 18 August 1927, MS-2379, BC Archives.

⁵⁷ P. Munday, interview with Susan Leslie (audio recording), 1976, tape 1-side 1, no. 160: 2-3, BC Archives.

⁵⁸ P. Munday, “Old Ways to Waddington” (audio recording), January 1964, tape 2-side 1, no. 4293: 1, BC Archives.

⁵⁹ P. Munday, interview with Susan Leslie (audio recording), 1976, tape 2-side 1, no. 1160: 2-3, BC Archives. More explicitly feminist mountaineers of Phyl’s time also insisted on leading, arguing that unless women were allowed to learn to lead they would never develop the judgment necessary to become good climbers. See Mazel, *Mountaineering Women*, II.

⁶⁰ D. Munday, “Adventure Trails of BC,” 258.

⁶¹ P. Munday, diary entry, 14 August 1927, MS-2379, BC Archives.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 10 July 1928.

lives.⁶³ In general, the more risky the situation, the more the women's game (with its notions of passivity and weakness) was abandoned.

In addition to risk-taking and leadership, being a good climber meant coping with physical pain. Once, Phyl checked Don's fall and his ice axe sliced her thigh so deeply it bared the tendon.⁶⁴ Another time, while leading a rock climb, a falling rock smashed into Phyl's skull. Blood seeped immediately through her kerchief, and she fought to maintain consciousness. Still, she never let go of the cliff, "cause I knew very well that if I fell, I would drag Don off."⁶⁵ While the women's game certainly required its players to endure pain and take risks – most notably in childbirth – the ability to stoically endure physical injuries was a stereotypically masculine attribute.⁶⁶ Yet, like the best players of the climbers' game, Phyl was willing to endure injury and pain in order to get herself and her climbing companions safely to the summit and back again.

While the Mundays most often encountered life-threatening situations on the glaciers, they were occasionally called upon to save each other in the valleys as well. The Mundays shared the Waddington region with bears. According to a manuscript of Don's, "These [bears] were not the somewhat chastened bears of national parks, but unintimidated lords of the wilderness."⁶⁷ The Mundays saw grizzlies glissading on snow slopes and passed unawares within a few metres of grizzlies on thickly forested riverbanks.⁶⁸ They learned to follow bear tracks to find river crossings, while the bears quickly discovered the Mundays' newly cut trails and used them.⁶⁹

⁶³ Philip Brock, "Phyllis Munday Obituary," *Canadian Alpine Journal* 76 (1991): 98. Don's lungs gave out: he had been badly injured by chlorine gas in the Great War.

⁶⁴ D. Munday, "Adventure Trails of BC," 83.

⁶⁵ P. Munday, "Old Ways to Waddington" (audio recording), January 1964, tape 1-side 2, no. 4293:1, BC Archives; for Don's account, see D. Munday, "Adventure Trails of BC," 258.

⁶⁶ While male mountaineers (and other men) confronted risk and pain in an attempt to reaffirm their masculinity, women were discouraged from putting their bodies through "voluntary" pain or otherwise exerting themselves. See Elaine Freedgood, *Victorian Writing about Risk: Imagining a Safe England in a Dangerous World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), chap. III, 113, 120. Freedgood is writing about the Victorian period. While the early twentieth century saw more women participating in sport, dominant ideas about "appropriate" physical activity for women did not drastically change. Women were expected to enjoy "leisurely paced activities played for fun and fresh air," not sports with a high risk of severe injury. Admittedly, the risk of injury in men's sport was also a matter of debate but not to the same extent as it was in women's sport. See Cahn, *Coming on Strong*, 15.

⁶⁷ D. Munday, "Pigs in Grizzly Pasture," 1936, p. 2, MS-2379, BC Archives.

⁶⁸ D. Munday, "Adventure Trails of BC," 62 (glissading); Munday, *The Unknown Mountain*, 45 (riverbanks).

⁶⁹ D. Munday, "Adventure Trails of BC," 232; D. Munday, "A Woman Against a Grizzly," n.d., 3, MS-2379, BC Archives.

However, the Mundays never had a serious encounter with a bear until 1936. It all began when they spied a young grizzly, perhaps two years old, across a meadow. Delighted, Phyl and Henry Hall whipped out their cameras, and Don began filming. In the 1930s even many seasoned backcountry travellers like the Mundays did not keep their distance from bears. The Mundays also took photographs of a bear stealing bannock out of their camp pan and of Don playing with a bear cub.⁷⁰ A grizzly at close range was a photographic opportunity not to be missed. Phyl wrote that she had fleetingly wondered where the mother was but decided this cub was big enough to be on its own. They waited, hoping it would come closer.

“Just then I heard a terrific roar,” Phyl wrote in her diary. She turned around. A mother grizzly and two yearling cubs were charging her from behind. Phyl and Don shouted and yelled at the bears, diverting the charge. The mother bear then charged straight at Phyl. Don jumped in front of his wife, waving his hat in a desperate attempt to distract the bear, which stopped two metres from him. Phyl then seized an ice-axe and threatened the bear with it. Don retreated slowly with the bear following him. He backed himself over a small cliff, and the bear ran away. Phyl rushed over to see if he was safe, and Don urged her to leave him and climb a tree. She would not.⁷¹ Thankfully, the bear did not return.

Phyl confessed that this was the worst experience they ever had in the mountains: “It was a horrible experience. I just go goose-skinny even now, after all these years, it’s too close for comfort.”⁷² Yet, even at her most terrified, Phyl was willing to risk her life to save Don. As Don wrote, “In any dangers ... [Phyl] never wavered in devotion or courage.”⁷³

In popular discourse heroic acts of courage and rescue have typically been linked far more to men than to women. While women can be deemed heroines for taking care of others, it is generally their husbands who are willing to die for their wives, their country, or their comrades.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ P. Munday, *Lantern Slides*, n.d., no. v14/AC414, Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies Archives, Banff, Alberta.

⁷¹ All of the preceding account is taken from Phyl’s diary (P. Munday, diary entry, 6 August 1936), except for the part about Phyl using the ice-axe. She remembers picking it up but doesn’t mention waving it at the bear. This is from D. Munday, “A Woman Against a Grizzly,” 5.

⁷² P. Munday, interview with Susan Leslie (audio recording), 1976, tape 1-side 2, no. T160: 2-3, BC Archives.

⁷³ D. Munday, “A Woman Against a Grizzly,” 3.

⁷⁴ While women have frequently been deemed “heroines” for their roles in taking care of those who are wounded or sick, it is men who are most associated with active acts of heroism (e.g., saving lives in daring escapades). For evidence that this view was prevalent throughout the twentieth century, see Maria Bucur, “Between the Mother of the Wounded and the Virgin of Jiu: Romanian Women and the Gender of Heroism during the Great War,” *Journal of Women’s History* 12, 2 (2000): 30-56; Mary Vincent, “The Martyrs and the Saints: Masculinity and the Construction of

However, although the Mundays reworked their manuscript drafts to hide this fact, Henry Hall had disappeared as soon as the grizzly charged, while Phyl and Don had stayed to protect each other.⁷⁵ Don trusted Phyl absolutely. He praised her for her “unquenchable enthusiasm, unflinching fortitude, unflinching courage and devotion.”⁷⁶ When they were put on separate rope teams for an ACC climb of Mount Robson in 1925, Don remarked that it was the first time they had been apart on a serious climb, and they vowed “it would be the last.”⁷⁷ Phyl played the climbers’ game so well that Don preferred her over any other climbing partner, male or female.

The Mundays went to the mountains in search of many things: one of the most important was adventure, and the risk that went along with it. They sought out challenging situations that would expand the limits of their strength. And they found them. However, these experiences tested their limits in more ways than they had bargained for. In risking their lives the Mundays also imperilled their beliefs and values. While they struggled to reproduce their city routines and positions in the mountains, they were occasionally forced to abandon them entirely, thus becoming aware of new possibilities. Near-death experiences can change everything. As Don Munday said of his, “We were different afterwards.”⁷⁸

Phyl ceased to play the women’s game whenever the situation demanded it. Usually, this was during climbs or other situations of risk, but there was one notable expedition in which she had to abandon it on an approach as well. This was on the single attempt on Mount Waddington that the Mundays made with another woman. In 1927 they convinced Phyl’s sister, Betty McCallum, to join their expedition. Once Betty found out what this entailed, she came to regret her decision. Betty was an ACC member, but like most members (especially most female members) she had no experience of climbing technical, isolated routes without a guide. Nor, it seemed, would she seek such experience out after

the Francoist Crusade,” *History Workshop Journal* 47 (1999): 68–98; Richard Sparks, “Masculinity and Heroism in the Hollywood ‘Blockbuster’: Culture Industry and Contemporary Images of Crime and Law Enforcement,” *British Journal of Criminology* 36, 3 (1996): 348–60; Amy Fried, “Gendered Heroism, Limited Politics” *Women and Politics* 17M 2 (1997), 43–76.

⁷⁵ D. Munday, “Wilderness Bears,” n.d., 81, MS-2379, BC Archives; P. Munday, “Mountain Memories: To Mount Silverthrone,” n.d., 7, MS-2379, BC Archives.

⁷⁶ D. Munday, *The Unknown Mountain*, xix–xx.

⁷⁷ D. Munday, “Canadian Climbing Adventures,” n.d., 3, MS-2379, BC Archives. Phyl and Don’s climbing careers were so inextricably tied together that it would be interesting to look at how their “couplehood” enabled and constrained them, and affected the gender games they played. This is beyond the scope of this article, but mountaineering couples (including the Mundays) are the subject of Siri Louie’s forthcoming dissertation from the University of Toronto.

⁷⁸ D. Munday, “I Will Lift Up Mine Eyes,” DMPM, box 1, file 9, 2.

this trip. Betty had an intense dislike for backpacking, and she could barely carry twenty kilograms at a time. To compensate for her smaller loads, Don carried about forty kilograms and Phyl carried between thirty and thirty-five.⁷⁹ Although Phyl and Betty started out cooking together, after a few days a routine was established wherein Don and Phyl relayed loads while Betty cooked, set up camp, and packed up the loads.⁸⁰ Betty played the women's game much more consistently than did Phyl. Unable or unwilling to do heavy labour, she stepped in and filled much of Phyl's usual role. Consequently, Phyl was pushed into a "no-man's-land" of gender on this expedition, continuing to do some of her typical jobs but also doing much more physical labour than was normal for her. Ironically, it took the presence of another woman to make her step further outside the bounds of accepted womanhood. It seems that she did not welcome this shift, complaining to her diary that she was tired of all the heavy packing and wished they had already climbed the mountain and were headed home.⁸¹ The next year, she resumed her standard role.⁸²

By the time Don, Phyl, and Betty reached the edge of the ice, Betty was already alternating between tears, sulking, and anger. Phyl despaired of what to do. Betty finally "[admitted] she [did] not love the mountains enough to work for them."⁸³ However, there was no way Betty could return on her own, and the Mundayes were not willing to take her back. Betty continued to complain, and her sister worried about her.

Relations did not improve on the glaciers. The three climbers made a marathon twenty-seven-hour attempt on Mount Waddington. Phyl moved into her climber's role: she led for much of the day, even after a rock smashed her head and she had gouged her arm deflecting another rock from Betty. Betty, on the other hand, was not interested in learning to lead climb. She was in tears again and "terribly grouchy."⁸⁴ Don, however, was ready to try for the peak as soon as possible. Phyl expressed some misgivings to her diary: she was tired, and she was also worried about her sister. Betty, clearly, still wanted to go home. Nevertheless, Don's wishes prevailed, and the three climbers set up a bivouac, or temporary camp, higher up the mountainside.

On the morning of 17 August 1927, the three climbers awoke in their glacier bivouac at 3:00 A.M. Chastising themselves for having overslept,

⁷⁹ P. Munday, diary, 1927.

⁸⁰ Ibid. Don tells the same story in "Adventure Trails of BC," 245-6.

⁸¹ P. Munday, diary entries, 10-12 August 1927.

⁸² Ibid., diary, 1928 (for good examples see entries for 18 June and 22 June).

⁸³ Ibid., diary entry, 10 August 1927.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 17 August 1927.

they hoped they would still be able to reach the summit of Mystery Mountain. They set out at 5:00 A.M., with no idea whether their route was feasible. It was possible that they would surmount a ridge only to discover an impassable gulf beyond it. However, their luck held, and the party advanced slowly towards the summit through a maze of "the largest and most beautiful crevasses" Phyl Munday had ever seen.

By late afternoon it was obvious that they could not reach the summit before dark. A storm was also blowing in off the ocean, blanketing the peaks below. The clouds rose and glowed an eerie red as they covered the setting sun. The wind immediately erased their footsteps. Still, the party pressed on to the base of the tower. At 6:40 P.M., with the weather worsening and fog and darkness settling in, Phyl took this picture of Don and her sister gazing at the summit (see Figure 4). The image conveys a sense of awe at being so close, along with resignation at, in Phyl's words, being "beaten" once again.

The party turned around and began the descent. Phyl was now leading; she and Don had been switching off leads all day. The mountaineers climbed three rock pitches, the second one by lamplight. Everyone's hands were numb and their clothes were frozen. The wind was biting cold, and thunder reminded the climbers of the approaching storm. On the third pitch the lamp carbide ran out, and they were forced to complete the climb in the dark. Then, suddenly, "the heart of the storm seemed to leap the intervening distance in an instant. The night burst into crashing flame." Rain, snow, hail, and wind soaked the climbers and pinned them to the rocks. Lightning lit up the glaciers; the glare off the ice was blinding. Ice-axes began to buzz with blue flame, which made them look like blowtorches. Sharp rocks had "their own little tongues of fire, spitting and buzzing." Fingers, hair, hats, and clothing were "shooting and sizzling fire."

In desperation, Phyl, Don, and Betty located an overhanging rock by the sparks glancing off it. They stood balanced precariously over a chasm, teeth chattering, until the worst of the storm was over.

At 2:30 A.M., nearly twenty-four hours since they had last slept, the party arrived, freezing and exhausted, at its bivouac. A river was running through it. "Food, wood, clothes, bedding lay soaking in running water." "Bed a lake," commented Phyl in her diary. The party huddled under a tarpaulin and shivered until daylight. They were warm only where they were touching each other. At daybreak they packed up their sopping, waterlogged gear and began hauling it down the mountain. The sun peeked out for a few minutes, and the climbers finally began to warm up.

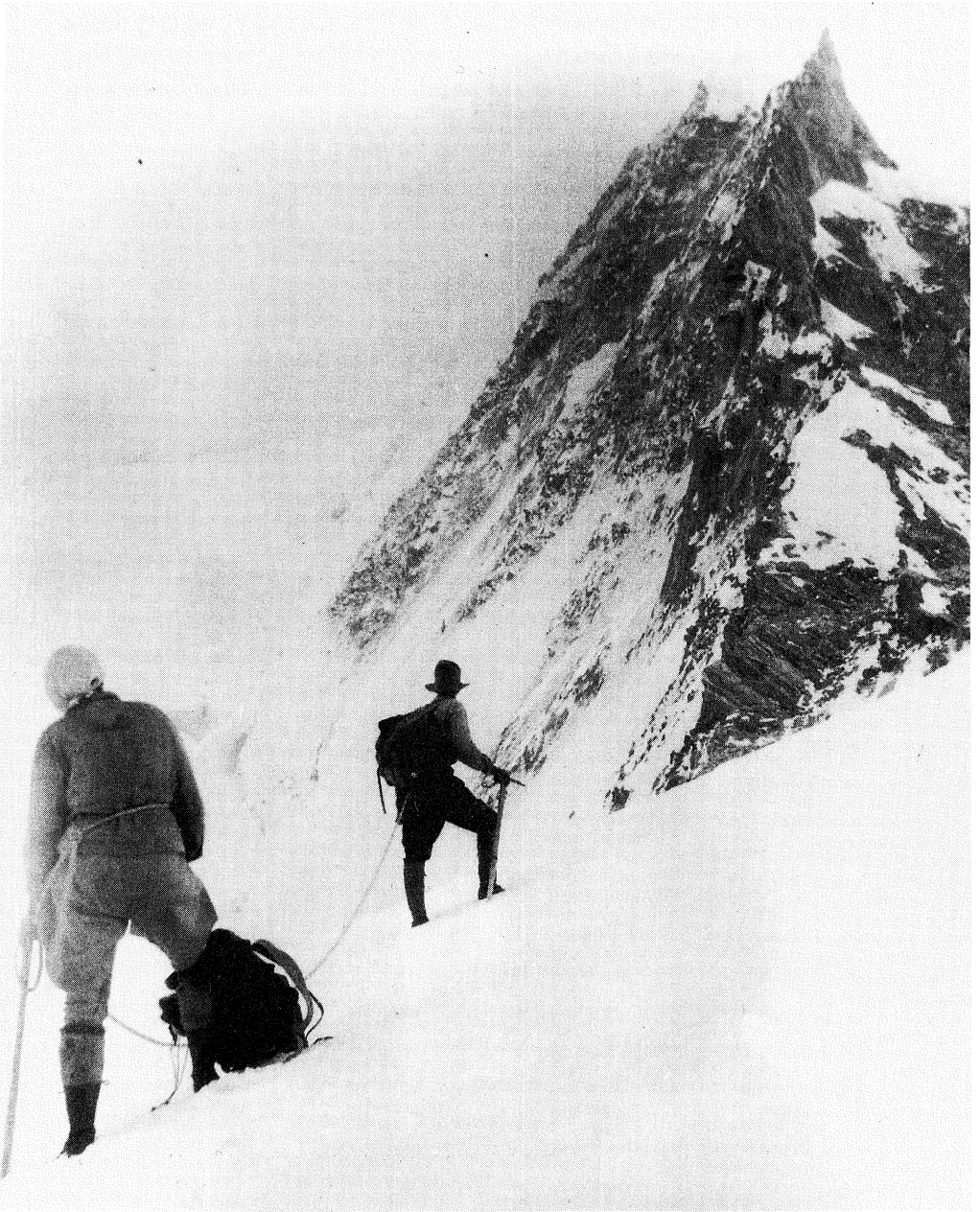


Figure 4. Don Munday and Betty McCallum just before turning around on Mount Waddington. (P. Munday, "At 11,500 feet on the West Ridge, Mount Waddington," 1927, Online Photo #1-61558, BC Archives).

At 12:35 P.M. they reached their intermediary camp half-asleep, where they had enough dry food for a small meal. The sun came out; they began to dry some of their belongings. A new thunderstorm rolled in, and they quickly packed up their gear and continued down to their base camp, arriving thirty-nine hours after beginning the climb. Betty, according to Phyl, was “all in and weepy.” She insisted that Don and Phyl take her out in time for the next steamer, and they agreed to do so.⁸⁵

Betty’s reaction is hardly surprising. This must be one of the most epic mountaineering days endured by anyone, ever. Many men would have been equally desperate to leave on the next steamer. Indeed, although Phyl never mentions male climbers crying or complaining, very few of them were clamouring to return the following year. In fact, Betty was only invited after the Munday’s other options – presumably all male – turned them down. Betty, however, behaved very much as most men would have expected a woman to behave in the mountains. She was never going to win at the climbers’ game, nor did she want to. She was tearful; she held up the expedition with her outbursts; she did not lead; she did not carry heavy loads.

Betty’s personal identity as a woman was incompatible with playing the climbers’ game, while Phyl’s was not. Although gender was important in the mountains, individual personality was a more central determinant of success. Phyl and Don Munday were relatively equal climbers who were perfectly able, if need be, of getting a party up or down a mountain in the worst conditions. This is not to say that Phyl always played the climbers’ game perfectly. Arguably in this case, both she and Don showed a serious lack of judgment in bringing Betty to Mount Waddington in the first place.

“A WOMAN OF BETTER FIBER THAN MOST”:
MOUNTAINEERING AND MASCULINITY

It is not surprising that most other women, like Phyl’s sister Betty, had difficulty playing the climbers’ game. Historically, mountaineering has been a spiritual, moral, national, and physical quest, but it has also frequently been a quest for manhood.⁸⁶ Climbing has always been a male-dominated sport. If nature makes most of the rules of the climbers’

⁸⁵ The account of the firestorm day has been pieced together from the following recollections (all from MS-2379, BC Archives): P. Munday, diary entry, 18 August 1927; D. Munday, “The Mystery Mountain Adventure,” 95-6; D. Munday, “Adventure Trails of BC,” 264-6.

⁸⁶ Sherry Ortner, *Life and Death on Mount Everest*, 217. This is equally true of most sports. For a good treatment of gender boundaries in organized sport, see Cahn, *Coming on Strong*.

game, then, historically, men have constructed the others. There are many ways to climb mountains, but mountaineering etiquette, especially in the 1920s and 1930s, reflected traditionally masculine values of daring, vigour, courage, physical strength, conquest, and subjugation.⁸⁷ The mountains had become a man's world, and survival in a mountain environment demanded qualities that, in interwar Vancouver, men were far more likely to have had a chance to develop. Admittedly, increasing numbers of women did take up sports during this period. Some historians have dubbed it the "Golden Age of Women's Sport" in Canada.⁸⁸ Yet women's participation in sport was a source of great controversy, and the debate was not just between men and women:⁸⁹ most girls were still told – often by female educators and role models – that they should not be too muscular, that physical exertion could ruin their sensitive nerves, and that men did not like the look of athletic women.⁹⁰ Middle-class women in particular often succumbed to the pressure to restrain from strenuous physical activity.⁹¹

In climbing mountains, therefore, Phyl Munday pushed cultural boundaries as well as her own mental and physical limits. Coming to grips with the few women who played the climbers' game could be problematic, particularly for male climbers. If men were supposed to be the only players who could win at the climbers' game, then successful female climbers could only indicate one of two things: either women were not all weaker than men or mountaineering was not that difficult.⁹² Few mountaineers would concede the second, and many were unwilling to

⁸⁷ The "man-made" rules and goals of the game often came into conflict with those established by the environment. If mountaineering was supposed to reaffirm masculinity, then extended time in the mountains often encouraged the decidedly unmasculine qualities of humility, retreat, and submission.

⁸⁸ Bruce Kidd, *The Struggle for Canadian Sport* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 95.

⁸⁹ For more on the debate over women's bodies and women's sports in this period, see Hall, *The Girl and the Game*, 73–99.

⁹⁰ Veronica Strong-Boag, *The New Day Recalled*, 31–2. Yet, at the turn of the twentieth century, many mountaineering men appeared to find athletic women attractive and were eager to marry a fellow mountaineer (Hansen, "British Mountaineering", 303–6). The number of marriages between climbers in the BCMC and ACC attests that this attitude was prevalent in Vancouver as well. There was debate in wider society throughout the period, however, as to whether or not athletic women were attractive. Many still embraced the prevalent Victorian attitude that women were unsuited to strenuous exercise. For a more in-depth discussion of the athletic woman as a physical ideal/anti-ideal throughout this period, see Cahn, *Coming on Strong*, 3–9, 19–23, 25–6, 77–9, 81–2. For more on the effect the medical profession and its ideas of biological determinism had on women's lives in an earlier period, see Patricia Vertinsky, *The Eternally Wounded Woman: Women, Doctors and Exercise in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990).

⁹¹ Kidd, *The Struggle for Canadian Sport*, 107. This was probably at least part of the reason why a fair number of middle-class women found the mountains so attractive: it was a place where they could exert themselves physically out of the public eye.

⁹² Hansen, "British Mountaineering," 311–2.

agree with the first. Therefore, some would inevitably seek to discover a third explanation; namely, they wondered if Phyl Munday was somehow faking it. They wanted to believe that even the best female climber was not nearly as competent, as strong, or as brave as the average man.

Indeed, Phyl sometimes had to put up with attitudes of suspicion, hostility, or condescension. In 1926 she wrote in anger that Thomas Ingram, a friend with whom she had climbed many times, would not allow her to row, nor would he row where she directed, even though she had been up the inlet before and he had not.⁹³ Another time, before she married Don, Phyl and a female friend went on a trip up the Alouette River Valley only to be turned back by the gauge-reader, who categorically refused to ferry two women across the lake. The next time Phyl invited Don along, and the expedition was successful.⁹⁴

However, Phyl did not view all reactions to her gender as negative. Occasionally she was simply amused or even touched. In one instance two prospectors the Mundays had invited to dinner in the backcountry appeared with cuts all over their faces, later confessing that “in honor of the lady in our party they had tried to shave with a knife.”⁹⁵ Another time Phyl was about to cross a bridge even shakier than the one in the Scar Creek photograph. Another member of the expedition, Johnnie, approached her and offered to take her pack across. Phyl refused at first, but he looked her in the eye and said, “I’m single.” Phyl often retold this story. “It was something that impressed me deeply, to think that he thought that way,” she said.⁹⁶ Indeed, although Phyl dismissed unwanted offers of help, she was not too proud to accept them when she was truly tired or scared.⁹⁷ She considered it appropriate that a single man should put a mother’s life ahead of his. Notably, though, Johnnie made no offer to carry Don, the father’s, pack across.

Although Phyl’s gender sometimes caused her to be treated differently and limited her, she pushed these limits by playing the climbing game so well. She changed many men’s prejudgments of her. Henry Hall, the climber who saw the photograph in the *Canadian Alpine Journal* of Phyl

⁹³ P. Munday, diary entry, 2 July 1926. Phyl rarely complains of outright discrimination in her Waddington diaries, however. Possibly she chose to climb with men who knew and accepted her.

⁹⁴ D. Munday, “The Unknown Mountain (Draft),” n.d., 44, MS-2379, BC Archives.

⁹⁵ D. Munday, “Adventure Trails of BC,” 41.

⁹⁶ P. Munday, interview with Dan Bowers (audio recording), 1972, tape 1-side 2, no. 1160, BC Archives.

⁹⁷ She was careful to “guard” her pack so it would not be secretly lightened on Mount Robson. See P. Munday, quoted in D. Munday, “Adventure Trails of BC,” 88. However, on later expeditions, she sometimes allowed men to relieve her of some weight when she was tired or suffering from arthritis. See P. Munday, diary entries, 25 June 1928, 24 July 1936.

crossing Scar Creek, was not the only man to make an exception for Phyl in 1933. His hired packers, Pete and Valleau, were shocked when a woman arrived with the party.⁹⁸ Out of politeness to their clients, they kept their misgivings to themselves. Later, when Phyl had dispelled all doubts about her capabilities, Pete confessed to her that he had not “[relished] the idea of a woman in the party for such a rugged trip.”⁹⁹ The suspicion surrounding Phyl’s abilities is also reflected in newspaper accounts of the Munday’s activities. While Vancouver reporters knew enough about Phyl to accept her as a skilled climber, British or American newspapers often assumed a woman climber could have made no significant contribution and did not even mention her in their articles about Mount Waddington.¹⁰⁰ Phyl constantly had to justify her worth – a task at which she was extremely adept, but a task nonetheless. In being forced to prove herself, she also proved the extent to which the climbers’ game was tied up in notions of masculinity.

Even though Phyl did not set out to break down gender boundaries, after climbing with her, few if any men could deny that she was an excellent climber. However, to many men, Phyl was not a model to which other women could – or should – aspire. Rather than changing their beliefs about gender entirely, they chose to believe that she was a woman for whom exceptions could be made, not proof that women could climb as well as men. Don hinted that even he espoused this view: “It takes a woman of better fiber than most to face exigencies of wilderness life without giving way to self-pity.”¹⁰¹ Phyl, it seems, was largely in agreement with this assessment. She wanted to be an exceptional woman; she took pride in being unique. When describing the hardships she underwent on the 1933 expedition, Phyl commented, “No wonder Pete [the packer] had been apprehensive about a woman member in the party.”¹⁰² She expressed pity, verging on condescension, for her sister Betty and the woman she climbed with on Mount Robson. Other women, it seemed, could only play “their” game. She was the only

⁹⁸ D. Munday, “The Mystery Mountain Adventure,” n.d., 171, MS-2379, BC Archives.

⁹⁹ P. Munday, “Mountain Memories,” n.d., 1, MS-2379, BC Archives.

¹⁰⁰ With few exceptions, local newspaper accounts recognized the extent of Phyl’s accomplishments and described her in much the same words as male climbers. See, for example, “Mt. Waddington Epic Attempt Is Described,” *Victoria Times*, 12 October 1934; “Fresh Assault to be Made on Mystery Mt. Again This Summer,” *Daily Colonist*, 23 May 1934. Accounts in the *New York Times* and *The Times* of London are strikingly different, crediting Don as the leader, photographer, and sole discoverer of Mount Waddington. See all articles about Mount Waddington, but especially “Group Off to Dare Peak Never Scaled,” *New York Times*, 23 June 1935; “Mt. Mystery Climb,” *The Times*, 29 August 1934.

¹⁰¹ D. Munday, “Untrodden Sky Lines,” 240.

¹⁰² P. Munday, “Mountain Memories,” 2.

woman who, while remaining a “real woman,” could also play the men’s games and win. Being the exception also allowed Phyl, consciously or not, to play the climbers’ game without posing too much of an overt challenge to its rules of gender.

Ideas about gender flow under the surfaces of human lives, pushing us in certain directions and limiting us in others. Like most people, Phyl Munday did not overly analyze and investigate these currents. For the most part, she simply steered through them as best she could, with her eyes focused on the mountains. While Phyl’s climbing certainly had far more to do with gender than she realized or admitted, climbing was her great passion and an end unto itself.¹⁰³ Nevertheless, whether or not she intended to do so, Phyl questioned the belief that the ideal climber was necessarily male. When she displayed pride in her backcountry “domestic” abilities; when she looked out for the weaker members and insisted on compromise, prudence, and empathy; she also brought elements of traditional femininity into the mountaineering identity – elements as important to survival in the mountains as the more masculine ones of strength and daring.

Phyl’s mountaineering adventures with Don were clearly what gave her life its greatest meaning and happiness. She did whatever was necessary in order to climb, successfully combining and manipulating gendered stereotypes to fit into a place that had its own exigencies and rules for survival. In so doing, she demonstrated the inconsistencies of the stereotypes themselves, and the reluctance of even extraordinary people to reject them completely. Phyl Munday is a reminder that life is always contradictory, compromised, and hemmed in by walls that are difficult to touch and define, let alone break down. Yet she also shows that sometimes, with enough determination, it is possible to find loopholes in boundaries and to accomplish things that, according to dominant reasoning, should be impossible.

¹⁰³ Phyl must have felt drawn to the mountains in part because they were a place where she could display and develop her “masculine” talents. Even as a child, Phyl was assertive, tomboyish, and physically strong. As a young girl, she once clubbed a lynx to death with the butt end of a rifle after the cat attacked her dog. See D. Munday, “Adventure Trails of BC,” 111. She also worried her parents by insisting on spending every weekend in the North Shore mountains, spurning more usual pastimes for girls her age. See P. Munday, interview with Susan Leslie (audio recording), 1976, tape 1-side 1, no. 1160: 2-3, BC Archives.