

**Mountaineers and Mountain Parks:
Reflections on History, Epistemology, and Cultural Landscapes**

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Looking down from the snowcapped ridge of Mt. Victoria above the Abbot Hut, dawn breaks with sun rays pouring into Banff National Park on my right side while shadows still linger in Yoho on my left. Many mountaineers have come to know this place on the Great Divide as the roof of the Rockies, but they also know it as a home place and part of who they are. This essay outlines a preliminary epistemology of place to contemplate the environmental history of mountaineers and mountain parks in the Canadian Rockies as exemplified by the case of the Alpine Club of Canada (ACC). The history of mountaineers and mountain parks can offer insights to an epistemology of place. Sites such as the Abbot Hut allow us to read how people write narratives on landscapes, places where nature and culture exist as an integrated entity. Understanding these connections might shift our ways of knowing and hold potential to transform civil society by raising environmental awareness and better conserving the multiple dimensions of heritage in parks.

Literary scholar Jeffrey McCarthy has identified that “mountaineering is a conflicted site for symbolic configurations of human interaction with the environment.”¹ The stories of mountaineering, he argues, encompass three primary modes of conceptualizing nature. Mountains have been conceptualized as objects to conquer and a picturesque setting to admire, but his main focus is a third possibility that speaks to “the interpenetration of the human and the natural.”² These modes are neither chronological nor teleological, but coexist across time. He reads climbing literature as a means to deconstruct the dualism of nature and culture in order “to reimagine the ways human beings understand their connection to the natural world.”³ Mountaineering narratives offer the potential for an epistemology of place predicated on a unity between mountaineers and the environment, rather than their separation, thereby rethinking and dissolving the disassociation of subject and object positioning typical of Cartesian paradigms that divide the human and non-human. The knowledge of place intermingles people and physical space, intertwined with meanings, amounting to a “subjective connection to landscape” that speaks of ontological connections and oneness of being, however fleeting, rather than alienation. In other words, an epistemology of place can be constituted by the stories, images, and human history of mountaineering that speaks to being *in and of* nature. Understanding the connections is vital to confronting the

environmental problems of thinking about nature as other and to the “estrangement from the natural world” that McCarthy contends is a fundamental issue current in contemporary North American society.

Similarly, the making of landscapes was underscored as a dialectical process of interplay between people and place by historian Claire Campbell in her study of Georgian Bay, Ontario. Geographer Graeme Wynn highlights that her interpretation indicates “nature and culture are inextricably bound together in landscape.”⁴ Moreover Campbell offers a polemic response to William Cronon and certain environmental history debates that render nature simply as a discourse and cultural construct. She counter-argued “it is impossible...to write environmental history without paying a great deal of attention to the environment in question; and it is irresponsible to imply that this environment does not have either an independent reality or a tangible effect on the course of human history.”⁵ Sense of place emerges over time from inhabiting landscape where, as Ken Ryden states, “any setting can become a symbol of and element of personal and group identity through sufficient familiarity and propinquity.”⁶ The summer cottagers on Georgian Bay are one example according to Campbell. They had both a sense of place and a land ethic that figured in environmentalism, despite being vulnerable to charges of exclusivity and elitism. Place identities became part of who they were. Like the cottagers’ rapport with Georgian Bay, mountaineers in the ACC often held seasonal affiliations to mountains and held a stake in knowing the mountain parks and a sense of place through a broad range of outdoor leisure.

The importance of investigating the history of outdoor recreation and camping by methodologically following “the hiking trails” was observed by James Morton Turner in his study juxtaposing the American woodcraft movement with the later ‘Leave No Trace’ movement in the United States during the 20th century. “Opening the backpacks, leafing through the guidebooks, and revisiting the campsites reveals more than just changes in the ways people have returned to nature. Indeed, it reveals the historical pliability of the very ideals to which wilderness travelers have aspired,” Morton contends.⁷ Wilderness recreationists have been “some of America’s most ardent environmentalists” yet the ideals of the wilderness movement were historically contingent and contested with regard to trends in the capitalist market for commodified wilderness experiences. Both movements he studied were implicated in social changes and critiques played out around leisure within a civil society. This was also the case with mountaineers in the ACC who were active in the Canadian mountain parks as they participated in the ideologies and political economies of outdoor recreation, sport, tourism, and conservation.

Outdoor recreation, such as backpacking, hiking, and camping, can influence a learned human understanding of environmentally responsible behaviour and the intrinsic value of nature. Declining visitation to US National Parks since 1987, after an earlier steady fifty-year increase, prompted social scientists Oliver Pergams and Patricia Zaradic to investigate changing trends in nature-based recreation. Their recent conclusions point to a “fundamental shift away from people’s interest in nature” evident in the United States and Japan. These findings suggest serious implications for conservation efforts because attempts to raise public awareness to address the current biodiversity crisis based on the intrinsic value of nature become less likely as people spend less extended time exposed to natural areas.⁸ Awareness of the environment grounded in place seems

imperative and cultures of mountaineering may have potential to contribute to such awareness.

What can we glean from history to move ahead understanding the nexus of people and place that informs the pressing environmental concerns of our era? Is there transformative potential in understanding how key mountain park users know these places? “Not only should social science theory generate new knowledge,” observed sociologist G. Llewellyn Watson, “but such knowledge should be a means of transforming society.”⁹ Here I also emphasize a role for humanities scholarship. Mountaineers in the ACC forged epistemologies of place at the interstices of culture and nature, perhaps revealing a oneness of being *in and of* nature. They articulated mutable ideals of wilderness and expressed knowledge of the physical actualities of mountain parks.



Fig. 1. Shadows of mountaineers at dawn ascending Mt. Victoria from the Abbot Hut. Photo: P.A. Reichwein, August 2004.

Mountaineering might be posited as an amalgam of recreational practices that opens a way of knowing people and place as an integrated entity, as well as offering a site to pry apart the shifting ideals of parks. One case study of this alternative epistemology in practice is the history of the ACC, first grounded in the national and provincial mountain parks of Alberta and British Columbia. Given the history of the ACC, founded in 1906, and its longstanding regional presence, it stands to reason that mountaineers and mountain parks in Canada may be closely connected. And these connections both absorbed and constituted philosophies of being and knowing that played into larger systems of political economy and environmental politics in civil society. The generation and integration of knowledge based *in and of* landscape interactions between mountaineers and mountain parks resulted in certain epistemologies that were also influenced by federal and provincial government regulatory authorities and management

regimes. At times, management policies have disconnected protecting natural resources and cultural resources, whereas people and places merged in the landscapes of mountain parks both spatially and historically. Following the history of the ACC along hiking trails and climbing routes to its gathering points may bring us to better understand the integration of nature and culture.

I will focus on how buildings, as a component of cultural landscape, figured in mountaineers knowing mountain parks. Alpine huts, club houses, campsites, and climbing routes frequented by the ACC are telling examples of the integration of people and place in cultural landscapes through the course of the last hundred years. Club dwellings are nodes on trails and routes that support recreational use and function within an integrated park complex. Mountaineers walk trails, ascend routes, and occupy huts in the mountain parks that were used by their predecessors generations ago. There is a strong historical resonance in these places. Several alpine huts in mountain national parks are cultural resources that have been designated as heritage buildings by the Federal Heritage Buildings Review Office (FHBRO) and are now protected and presented as heritage resources by park authorities, and operated as working huts by the club. The Elizabeth Parker Hut in Yoho National Park and the Abbot Hut in Banff National Park are examples of two such successful advances, designated by FHBRO in 1987 and 1997 respectively, and furthermore the latter was also designated a National Historic Site in 1997.¹⁰ On the other hand, the history of the demolished ACC Banff Clubhouse and the extant Claremout House situated on Sulphur Mountain in Banff National Park, are also highly instructive examples because of failures to recognize *and* protect cultural heritage. These hotspots put the problematic and peculiar issues of nature/culture into the urban backyard of Canada's first national park.



Fig. 2. An evening gathering at the front door of Abbot Hut. The hut called Abbot Pass Refuge Cabin was formally designated in 1997 as a National Historic Site in Banff National Park. It is operated by the Alpine Club of Canada. Photo: P.A. Reichwein, August 2004.

The ACC's Banff Clubhouse was built in 1909 and intentionally demolished by Parks Canada in 1974. What would most likely be considered a national historic site and prime architectural landmark by today's management standards was actively reduced to rubble as the direct result of a federal policy move to eliminate private leaseholds outside the Banff townsite boundaries, more specifically leaseholds for the ACC Clubhouse and the Rimrock Hotel both situated on Sulphur Mountain Road. The fate of the ACC national Clubhouse was a controversial issue within the club, which ultimately opted by a contentious vote to relinquish its leasehold and subsequently pulled out of the park to establish a new national clubhouse headquarters in Canmore where it operates today. By contrast, the Rimrock Hotel leasehold was not eliminated, and, subsequently, the hotel was vastly expanded as a luxury resort and conference centre in 1992. Rather than seeing this case as an example validating the policy drive to eliminate leaseholds, we ought to ask critical questions about why the longstanding clubhouse was eliminated whereas the hotel expanded. Mountaineers had gathered at the ACC Banff Clubhouse for more than sixty years.

Situated nearby the original site of the ACC Clubhouse, Claremount House was built in 1920 as the summer residence of the club's founding president Arthur Oliver Wheeler, a renowned Canadian surveyor. Named after his wife Clara, who was the daughter of Dominion botanist John Macoun, the Craftsman-style bungalow served as the base for Wheeler's backcountry tour company. Arthur Wheeler was also a key national park conservation activist who engineered the establishment of the Canadian National Parks Association in 1923; in this respect, he has been compared to American conservationist John Muir.¹¹ Claremount remained in the Wheeler family until 1953 and the lease for this site reverted to Parks Canada in 1991. Sadly, the house has met with abandonment leading to a slow demise rather than benefiting from consistent conservation intervention after it was reviewed and designated as a recognized Federal Heritage building in 1993.¹² Arthur Wheeler was later commemorated as a significant person by a Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada plaque at the Columbia Icefields in Jasper in 1998. Standing within meters of Sulphur Mountain Road, Wheeler's house remains boarded up and vacant where it now exists within the boundaries of a wildlife corridor that prohibits access. Supportive action is urgently needed to protect the building and prevent a unique cultural resource from going extinct.



Fig. 3. Claremount House, front on left, seen from the side view with windows boarded. It was the summer home of Arthur Wheeler who built the small pond into the landscaping. The federal heritage building in Banff National Park was still standing in 2008 but left neglected. Photo: P.A. Reichwein, August 1998.

During a centennial speech to the ACC in 2006, mountaineer and surveyor Dr. John Wheeler, a past club president now in his eighties, again drew attention to Claremount House near Middlesprings. Growing up there as a boy during summers spent with his grandparents Arthur and Clara, John was touched by his family's commitment to mountains and mountaineering. It was a sense of place grounded in a cultural landscape, roaming about a home in the forest where thermal waters trickled down Sulphur Mountain into a garden pond where his white-bearded grandfather bathed in the yard overlooking the Bow Valley. These are the "home places" Stan Rowe writes about where humans are enveloped within the ecosystem and part of it, and Bill Cronon's backyards where we live in the "middle ground."¹³ Claremount House in Banff National Park still stands as a cultural landscape representing the history of the ACC and of the Wheeler family's role engaging mountaineers in mountain parks. Whereas Middlesprings referred to the thermal hot springs and karst outlet midway up Sulphur Mountain during John Wheeler's boyhood, and even in more recent times, it is now more likely to evoke the name of the suburban subdivisions Middlesprings I and II, constructed in the 1990s as middle-class housing in the town of Banff; these urban developments and new backyards press against the wildlife corridor on Sulphur Mountain only a short distance from the house at Claremount. Overall, the fates of these sites in Banff offer a cautionary tale.

The demolition of the ACC Clubhouse and the current ongoing neglect of Claremount House constitute an erasure of local human presence and history in the urban backyard of Banff National Park. The loss of these sites may well be considered an egregious social displacement due to the shifting priorities of regulatory and policy regimes. It is a view that can magnify over time particularly when present use obscures the history we assign to a place. Whereas the success of the Sulphur Mountain wildlife

corridor has been measured in positive benefits to the protection of various species, which is not disputed here, the loss of cultural heritage due to historically inconsistent public policies has yet to be accounted for in the positioning of public interests in contests of power. Good intentions, compromises, science, expediency, and the prevalence of capitalist development influence in the national parks have all figured in decision making.

Other alternatives may have recognized a role for the integrated management of natural and cultural resources as a landscape whole. Does one have to be at the expense of the other? Innovative collaborative resource management and land use with Aboriginal peoples in Canada's northern national parks and Gwaii Haanas demonstrate holistic alternatives that value the integrated whole of natural and cultural concerns that are epistemologically united within Indigenous worldviews, not divided.¹⁴ In 2005, UNESCO merged its assessment criteria for the selection of World Heritage Sites to integrate natural and cultural heritage under one matrix.¹⁵ The IUCN Category 5 classification for cultural landscapes also offers an alternative model.¹⁶ Other parks might productively import these lessons to rethink how to manage cultural landscapes based on an integrated epistemology of place, particularly in cases that appear to set natural and cultural resource management in competition against each other for a few precious meters of space. This competition may be the product of how we frame our ways of thinking. The integrated management of natural and cultural resources was a goal of the first *Banff National Park Cultural Resource Management Plan* (1998), which reflected a crisis-driven era of loss and growing awareness of the need for cultural heritage protection.¹⁷ Of course, in practice many difficulties can arise implementing principles in highly politicized management situations, but great possibility can also reside in praxis.

When William Cronon launched his now canonized social critique of urban white American discourses of nature that construct wilderness as unpeopled, he concluded by urging readers to look for and after "wildness" and "nature" in their "own backyards"—a worthwhile invocation even while his other arguments provoked substantial controversy in environmental history.¹⁸ But whose backyard and where? Arguably, for generations, Canada's mountain parks were the backyards of mountaineers in the ACC, among many other climbers and recreationists. This connection was made evident in the use of the term "playground" as a metaphor commonly expressed as an ideal of parks in Canada throughout much of the 20th century, as much as it was socially and spatially manifested in the club's physical pursuits climbing, hiking, skiing, and camping in the parks. The club institution facilitated repeated park visits, seasonally, through individual lifetimes, and from one generation to the next. If the mountain parks were the backyard of the ACC, it follows that some club members (although certainly not all) became aware of these places as part of themselves and their own being, forging potentially profound relationships that touched both directions of knowing humans as *in and of* nature, thereby dissolving dualism and opening a way of knowing people and place as an integrated entity. Therein also resided an implicit reason for mountaineers to be aware of and responsible for their own power and privilege knowing these areas as active agents within civil society. The symbolic purchase of Canada's mountain parks in the Rockies (and Columbia Mountains), moreover, extended beyond the scope of a specific region to national and international dimensions of signification, thereby rendering a big backyard

of constituents who might conceivably care about an integrated way of knowing the mountain parks as places enriched with layered meanings and historical connotations, or, to put it in the words of historian Simon Schama, to see and comprehend their surroundings as “landscapes of memory.” Excavating these layers to reimagine the historically and culturally contingent relationships between people and nature and to explain their importance is a key task of researchers, public history, and education in parks and protected areas as well as museums, historic sites, and academia.

Do mountaineers matter to mountain parks? Current research emphasizes that participation in outdoor leisure can inculcate awareness and social commitment to values of biodiversity conservation, wilderness advocacy, and habitat protection. Another value to foster in the interests of understanding people and ecology is cultural heritage resource protection. If history can provide an analog for the present era, there may be something to be learned from the narratives of mountaineers and mountain parks to encourage an epistemology that integrates people and place. There is an implicit need and function for committed constituencies of environment, park, and protected area supporters in a democratic civil society; in this sense, the more backyards the better. Humanities and social sciences research, along with other science, that renders an understanding of epistemologies of place as contingent and contested fields of knowledge can have a transformative power within this arena. Public history, research, and management policies that acknowledge the depth of connection between people and land in the mountain parks act toward dissolving the epistemological boundaries between the so-called human and non-human worlds of culture and nature, in order to embrace and advocate for the shared common ground of cultural landscapes in Canada’s parks and protected areas, and beyond. It is an outlook for mountaineers and the rest of us to contemplate, for ultimately, we all drink from watersheds in the same backyard.

Endnotes

¹ Jeffrey McCarthy, “A theory of place in North American mountaineering,” *Philosophy and Geography* vol. 5, 2 (2002): 179.

² McCarthy, 179.

³ McCarthy, 190.

⁴ Graeme Wynn cited in Claire Elizabeth Campbell, *Shaped by the West Wind: Nature and History in Georgian Bay* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2005), xv.

⁵ Campbell, 199.

⁶ Ryden cited in Campbell, 160.

⁷ James Morton Turner, “From Woodcraft to ‘Leave No Trace’: Wilderness, Consumerism, and Environmentalism in Twentieth-Century America,” *Environmental History* 7, no. 3 (July 2002), 462-84.

⁸ Oliver Pergams and Patricia Zaradic, “Evidence for a fundamental and pervasive shift away from nature-based recreation,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*, 105, no. 7 (February 19, 2008): 2296, 2299.

⁹ G. Llewellyn Watson, *Social Theory and Critical Understanding* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1982), 97. Notwithstanding the main point of his contention about the role of social science in catalyzing social transformation, Watson nonetheless dichotomized nature and culture in his related assertion that “men and women are more than mere objects existing in the natural world. They are the creators of the liveable world—the cultural world.” See p. 97. His discussion deals further with a fundamental alienation of man and nature characteristic in the writings of Karl Marx. I contend the seam between these worlds is permeable and subject/object identities are changeable and contingent.

¹⁰ Personal Communication, A.L. Sandy Aumonier to P.A. Reichwein, 30 June 2008. I would like to thank Sandy Aumonier, Community Planner and Cultural Resources Planner for Parks Canada Agency, Western and Northern Service Centre in Calgary, Alberta, for providing information as to the dates of these designations.

¹¹ Whereas John Muir has been famed as an American conservationist and founder of the Sierra Club, Arthur Wheeler's advocacy for Canadian national parks, along with his achievements as a surveyor, have yet to garner widespread public renown. For background to Wheeler's national advocacy role during the period of Claremount House, 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 (1996): 129-55.

¹² The year FHBRO made this designation was confirmed by Aumonier to Reichwein, 30 June 2008.

¹³ Stan Rowe, *Home Place: Essays on Ecology* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 2002). William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature" *Environmental History* 1:1 (1996), 7-28. Among the "wild places much closer to home" that Cronon remarked on celebrating because "they remind us of the wildness in our own backyards, of the nature that is all around us if only we have eyes to see it" was a group of ponds, near his house, where warm water from a limestone spring kept the pools open through the winter and attracted waterfowl. See pp. 21-22.

¹⁴ Juri Peepre and Philip Dearden, "The Role of Aboriginal Peoples" in *Parks and Protected Areas in Canada: Planning and Management*, ed. Philip Dearden and Rick Rollins (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2002), 323-52. Also see Lawrence Berg, Terry Fenge, and Philip Dearden, "The Role of Aboriginal Peoples in National Park Designation, Planning, and Management in Canada" in *Parks and Protected Areas in Canada: Planning and Management* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1993), 225-55.

¹⁵ United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation, Intergovernmental Committee for the Protection of the World Natural and Cultural Heritage, *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention* (Paris: World Heritage Centre, January 2008), 20-21. See Paragraph 77 and marginalia related to criteria changes.

¹⁶ Philip Dearden and Rick Rollins, "The Times They Are Still A-Changin'" in *Parks and Protected Areas in Canada: Planning and Management*, ed. Philip Dearden and Rick Rollins (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2002), 12.

¹⁷ Canadian Heritage Parks Canada, *Banff National Park Cultural Resource Management Plan*, January 1998, 4. Section 3.2.1 of this plan indicated a key goal and essential future direction of cultural resource management in the park was "to manage cultural and natural resources found together in situ as equal parts of one system according to an integrated concept of ecosystem management."

¹⁸ William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature" *Environmental History* 1, no. 1 (1996), 7-28. See pp. 21-22.