

MOUNT ROBSON  
(1913)

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BY W. W. FOSTER

The year 1913 was unique in the annals of the Alpine Club of Canada, as in addition to the regular annual outing, the establishment of a supplementary camp, for active members only, provided an opportunity to visit "The New Field for Mountaineering," ably described by Mrs. Elizabeth Parker in an article appearing in the May issue of *Scribner's*, which had previously been reported upon by the Director of the Club, Mr. A. O. Wheeler, after a season of personal investigation.

Other articles in the club's annals detail the co-operation secured from the Railway Companies and the Provincial Government, which, coupled with the great organizing ability of the Director, made the establishment of a camp in this comparatively unknown territory possible, a wonderful region containing as a climax of many attractions. Mount Robson, the monarch of the Canadian Rockies, a peak which the Club's executive had determined to make its own.

En route by rail and trail, in the city, or resting around the base camp at Mount Robson station on the G.T.P.Ry., from whence a view could be obtained of the great mountain itself, some sixteen miles distant, the topic of conversation was naturally Mount Robson and how to conquer it. Curiously enough after the Director had announced the decision of the executive as to the personnel of the first two parties selected to make the attempt, and given Mr. A. H. MacCarthy, of Summit, N.J., with the writer, and Conrad Kain, their commission to climb Robson from its northeast side, Mr. MacCarthy and myself, whilst gazing at the mountain from the base

camp, sketched out upon its southerly face, seen from the railroad, what we thought might be a feasible route, little thinking that a few days later from Mount Robson's summit, we should complement our observations, and be forced by the exigencies of the situation partially to adopt it.

The northeast face, the one selected by members of the English Alpine Club for previous attempts, terminates in an arête, which from the valley below would appear to provide a sure and comparatively quick connection to the summit. Of the latter feature more anon, but, at any rate, the party received many assurances that "to make the arête meant the capture of the peak."

The first days were anything but encouraging in respect to weather conditions, but, on July 30th we left the main camp of the Alpine Club and rendezvoused at the "Extinguisher," a peculiar cone of rock far up the great Robson Glacier, and on its north side. There at an elevation of nearly seven thousand feet, a little cache was built for blankets and provisions, and, to avoid the discomfort of melting ice, a resting place made in the moraine by laying flat stones in a depression in the debris; as, although very anxious about the weather, which was still threatening, it was determined to get a good night's rest and be all ready for the morrow. The campaign mapped out that evening, in view of the facts that we were as high up as it was considered possible to camp, and that the failure of previous expeditions had been attributed to lack of time and bad weather conditions at higher altitudes, was to start in the morning as soon as there was any possibility of moving with safety, travel light to ensure all possible speed, and get back to the cache before darkness set in.

Midnight saw the last cloud roll away, and by three a.m. a clear, starry sky gave promise of the weather necessary to ensure success. At 3.30 all was in readiness

for a start; but it was not light enough to get away until 4.15, and even then the first portion of the upper section of the Robson Glacier, with its fine séracs, and great crevasses, was crossed in the half light.

From the glacier, the course led up a broken wall of ice and snow to an outlier of Robson known, owing to its rounded top, as the "Dome." The summit of the Dome, 8,700 feet, was crossed at 7.30, and with the arête of Robson about two thousand feet above, and a magnificent day in prospect, there was every reason to feel satisfied. A slight descent to the northeast wall of Robson revealed a very ugly bergschrund which required considerable time and care to negotiate. Finally, however, with the assistance of a temporary bridge formed by a cave-in, it was overcome, and the wall of ice and rock was reached. From lower levels this wall appears to afford a lot of good rock work, but alas for appearances! The rock was covered with verglas (a thin coating of ice), and only at rare intervals could a real rock footing be obtained.

The climb up this two thousand feet of wall was extremely slow. Over one hundred ice-steps had to be cut in a 60 to a 65 per cent. slope. It was, of course, the shady side of the mountain, and the wind was very keen; in addition, a constant lookout had to be kept to guard against small slides from the overhanging slope above. Conrad would not accept any relief at step-cutting, saying he must know his own steps to come down that place. Sometimes many minutes elapsed before a forward move could be made, and standing in these ice-steps upon the steep slope, with drifting ice blowing around, was in a measure the most trying part of the climb, as when in progress, no matter what the difficulties may be, with the mind occupied the body will not feel fatigued.

The arête, whose elevation was determined at 10,500 feet, was reached at 12.30; its long knife-like edge, worn by wind and exposure, afforded no footing, and keen

disappointment mingled with admiration at the panorama before us. Far from affording an easy path to the summit, the ridge terminated in a small field of snow above which were great masses of ice and rock, built up dome upon dome; the exposed portions swept clear by raging storms revealed clear green ice scintillating in the sunshine, and, faintly outlined in the clouds above, appeared a spire, the true summit of Robson, impossible to distinguish from the lower levels.

A little place was cut out to rest for lunch, and it was noted whilst waiting, that as the sun passed over the mountain, the ice-steps cut with so much care would disappear, and that snow-slides on the small slopes were constantly taking place, rendering the wall we had ascended impossible except in the early morning.

The arête was followed westward by means of steps cut on the south side just below its edge; the main peak disappeared, and great domes of ice overshadowed the snowfield to which the arête gave access. The northern side from this point is impracticable, being perpendicular rock and ice with overhanging cornice.

From the southeast and south side the best view of the great masses of ice and rock completing the final ramparts of Robson could be obtained, many of them of most fantastic shape; but, more especially owing to the overhang of one great mass which appeared ready to break off, and which it would be necessary to cut up, under and around, it was determined to investigate the western face. This was found to be much more regular in formation, but, weather-worn as it was to a smooth surface, the ice was too hard to permit step-cutting in the time available, and a return was made to the southeast end of the snowfield, for a final encounter with the mountain, whose actual summit had not been seen since the brief glimpse obtained from the first portion of the arête at 12.30.

Ascending steep snow and ice, it was nearly 3 p.m. before an ice-wall was reached by crossing a narrow ice bulwark, which spanned the eastern end of a great crevasse, and from this ice-wall it appeared connection to the summit would be attained. Thence upward very strenuous work was encountered. Up steep pitches, in one place an ice couloir being negotiated which was almost perpendicular, Conrad cut steps as though inspired. The flying ice combined with drifting snow blown off the higher slopes, froze upon the clothing, and the rope, which had been wet earlier in the day, became hard and difficult to handle. Fortunately, except for a few clouds around the summit, the sky was clear, and whilst dome after dome obscured any vision of the actual summit, the rate of grade and aneroid readings gave assurance that the end was near.

A little cap of cloud covered the exact summit, and when after a short, steep piece of work Conrad turned and said "I will take you no further," it was difficult for a moment to realize that Robson was won. A few minutes later every particle of cloud rolled away, and a panorama was unfolded that can never be described. Two thousand feet higher than any other mountain, as though at the masthead, we beheld a sea of mountains, glaciers, snowfields, lakes and waterways, displayed in endless array; just a hint of civilization appeared in a little smoke along the G.T.P. and C.N.R. right-of-way beside the Fraser River, and, nestling beside Berg Lake straight down below, the tents of the Alpine Club sent the smoke curling up from the commissariat. In all, the vision bounded only by the horizon, must have included eight to nine thousand square miles of wonderful alpine territory, and awed too by the realization that this was but a tithe of the country's vast scenic heritage, little was said during the fifteen minutes spent on the summit.

The aneroids showed an approximate elevation of 13,150 feet, and when at 5.30 p.m. the descent was decided

upon, Conrad voiced the opinion of all three in saying that we could not return the way we came up, knowing the steps would be gone on the northeast wall, and in any case it would be dark before we could reach it.

However, the west side of the mountain appealed to all, and starting off with Conrad's cheery "I will find a way," splendid progress was made down the steep ice to the snowfield, and thence it was concluded to cut down to the glacier falling from the south side of Robson toward the valley of the Little Fork of the Fraser, trusting to find from the glacier some means of reaching the rocks of lower altitude. The glacier, which from the heights above appeared so full of promise, was badly crevassed and sheer ice falls, blocking the way, necessitated its abandonment. Retracing up the glacier and to the east in the failing light, access was obtained to bare rock, and just before dark a resting-place was located at a little over nine thousand feet elevation, with the arête travelled earlier in the morning above. To the west lay the glacier, upon which great avalanches soon commenced to pour from the upward heights, whilst for thousands of feet below dropped away the great rock ramparts of Robson's western face. With a few loose stones at the feet to give more or less imaginary stability to the sloping resting-place, lying close together, and for a while tying left arms together with ropes, but afterwards casting loose as "one turn, all turn" would be necessary, a good rest was obtained, the last word being from the irrepressible Conrad, who, after a particularly heavy avalanche had thundered down the glacier, said: "If that goes on, it will spoil my good night's rest."

Daylight disclosed three cold climbers, with faces badly swollen as a result of exposure, one telling how he dreamt that his friends in Austria had passed along in the night with loads of wood for a camp-fire and how he "forgot to get a match," whilst another had "visions of friends from the camp below with huge piles of blankets,

but none to spare.” Then came a rock descent which seemed under the circumstances almost interminable. There is ledge after ledge on this side of Robson, a little shelf of shale and then a wall of rock, sometimes perpendicular in character and often with an overhang just above the shelf, repeated for thousands of feet. Time after time a ledge would be reached that seemed to bar further means of descent, until some passable chimney would be discovered to connect with the ledge below.

For four hours these rocky ramparts were contended with, and then it was found possible to make a crossing below the great glacier, whose configuration had barred progress the night before, to the western side of the valley, thence work around to the rock ridge connecting Robson with its most southerly outlier, cross the ridge and descend its western face to Lake Kinney where, at 12.30, the climb was over. Four hours later, approaching camp by the Lake Kinney trail, the party met Mrs. E. Parker making observations at Berg Lake, and the first congratulations received upon a successful ascent and complete traverse of the mountain were enhanced in value at the hands of one of the Club’s lady officers.

The primary factor in the success of this expedition was, of course, the ideal weather conditions, superinduced by the marvelous resource and skill of Conrad Kain, whilst the fact that the party had been out together upon many previous occasions, ensured that mutual confidence essential to quick work. Time upon this climb is a vital factor, as it is not only necessary to reach the summit, but, to do so in time to return to safety before dark, if success is to be attained.

The northeast route as followed in the ascent is a magnificent one, but for reasons given can only be used in conjunction with a descent on the opposite side, and this, on account of the time involved, renders it

impracticable at present. Remember, there are six hundred ice-steps to cut.

The south or southwest side gives every promise of being the one from which ascents should be made, as permitting the establishment of a cache at a fairly high altitude, and the possibility of more expeditious climbing beyond, and I believe this opinion was corroborated by the subsequent investigation of other parties.

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