

FIRST ASCENT OF MT. ROBSON BY LADY  
MEMBERS

BY PHYLLIS MUNDAY

The return from a climb is hardly the time one expects a grand surprise. This was my experience on returning from Mt. Mumm, when Mr. Wheeler told my husband to be prepared to go to the high camp on Mt. Robson next morning and, in spite of the prevailing impression that no women would be allowed to attempt the "big climb," I found I was to go also.

Our companions were to be, Mr. Lambart whose company we had enjoyed on one climb already, and Mr. Drinnan. Shortly before starting we found our number increased by Miss A. E. Buck and Mr. Porter, Joe Saladana, a guide employed by Donald Phillips, completed the party.

I found the heat and the choking dust of the long nine miles down to Lake Kinney nearly the most trying part to the whole trip. Our lengthy rest there after lunch seemed merely to give the slope of Robson added time to heat with the afternoon sun. On the steep climb of 3,500 feet to High Camp not a drop of water was to be found. This was extremely trying with heavy packs, as we had to take up food from the cache at Lake Kinney. Having seen my lady companion's pack lightened, unbeknown to her, of the supplies she was going to carry, led me to guard mine closely. The upper part of the climb was mostly on rocks and in one place a fixed rope saved time and effort up shelving ledges.

High Camp, in charge of Herbert Newcomb, was surprisingly spacious and comfortable, consisting of three tents, one provided with a stove, plenty of cooking utensils and bedding. This wooded shelf was practically at timberline on this slope.

The first climbing party of the year had not returned when we arrived at 8 p.m. Herbert served us the excellent soup intended for them, but before it was cool enough to drink we heard a shout from the cliffs above, so poured it back in the pot and impatiently awaited their arrival. On seeing only two weary men out of six return we had visions of disaster. The two had turned back at 11,000 feet. The last they had seen of Conrad Kain, Mr. Moffat, Mr. Geddes and Mr. Pollard, was close up under the peak at 5 p.m. still ascending. Therefore the hope of their returning that night was slight, which meant we could not climb on the morrow.

We were awakened about 4 a.m. next morning by Conrad's well-known yodel, and had time to prepare their breakfast before they arrived, tired, hungry but radiantly victorious.

We had to resign ourselves to a precious, perfect climbing day—rare enough on Mt. Robson—in camp, and so a quarter of a mile of trail was built to a tributary of the Grand Couloir, the nearest water supply. Bathing parties then proved popular. We were fortunate in seeing the whole front of the Whitehorn Glacier break off, yet the great ice cap on Mt. Robson, visible five thousand feet above us, seemed strangely silent although the night before we had listened to an almost terrifying description of ice avalanching across the route of ascent.

Three times during the night we were roused instantly by the ominous patter of rain on the tents. When Conrad woke us at 2.30 a.m. our section of the sky was cloudless, much to our joy. At 3:30 a.m. we were on our way. For a thousand feet the shelving ledges were about as steep as one could stand on; then came a wall seemingly without a break, which Conrad had not wished to attempt to descend in the dark on the previous trip. On surmounting this we had a chance to study the immense cliffs dipping to the shore of Lake Kinney—Mt. Robson is one mountain which loses nothing by close approach. We reached the crest of the ridge just in time to see a great slice of the ice front

tip slowly outward and crash down toward the valley of the Little Fork. (This glacier should be named.) Mounting the rocks beside the glacier we soon came to the point where it breaks over the crest of the ridge, and overhangs the top of the couloir which supplies High Camp with water. The rock was sound and the ledges good so we crossed rapidly under the menacing ice without having to rope up.

The shattered nature of the ridge called for constant care to avoid knocking rocks on those below. Conrad's running fire of excruciatingly funny anecdotes sometimes threatened to interfere with our showing as climbers, in spite of the Director's parting injunction that we were engaged in a serious undertaking.

At 9:30 we lunched on the rocks, about 10,500 feet, in sight of the great ice wall about three hundred feet in height, which cuts completely across the glacier and caps the ridge diagonally upwards until it meets the Wish-bone Arête, this wall furnishing the chief danger point of the route. For the greater part of the climb so far the peak had been in plain view, a gleaming horn of ice against a blue-black sky—incredibly far away if we believed Conrad's estimate of the time to reach it.

At the edge of the glacier above this point we roped up for the first time; following along the crest of the ridge to the ledges under the ice-wall. Here Conrad paused to give us all demonstrated instructions regarding the special handling of the rope in such a dangerous situation. The huge hundred and fifty foot wall towering its threatening overhanging ice above us was most impressive. It was silent—too silent! I could almost imagine I heard it creaking ready to give way when we started. "Are you ready?" Conrad asked. As we answered, he said "go," and we went. Never before had I travelled so fast under such circumstances. The ledges being from one to four feet wide and good travelling, barring the remains of recent avalanches, we lost no time in getting across. Waiting on the ledge to watch the second rope traverse under the wall,

I had time to realize that it was about two hundred yards we had travelled on this horseshoe ledge, with an 8,000 ft. precipice below. The second rope followed in safety. It was a relief to us all, and I'm sure more so to Conrad, for he felt the added responsibility of the second rope.

All together again, we climbed from ledge to ledge and up small cliffs to a place in the wall where the ice had broken away. Leaving the second rope on the rocks till we reached a place of comparative safety, Conrad cut steps to a ledge in the wall where we were able to stand together. From here a narrow shelf in the ice traversed out and over the big white wall. He cut the steps along it with one hand, steadying himself by handholds cut in the wall with the other. Surmounting this we were at last on the glacier above the huge ice wall. Conditions were heavy for the leader, the snow being very soft. To relieve Conrad, Joe took the lead for a while, following the tracks of the former party. Nearly an hour was lost rescuing Joe's ice axe from a crevasse when a treacherous ice bridge gave way under his weight, in spite of his careful testing. Additional time was lost finding another place where the crevasse could be crossed—there was no way round.

Once across, we soon reached the top of the long ridge running out toward Mt. Resplendent, whence the icy summit looked so near, and yet so far, the huge ice terraces of the final slope appearing like monster breakers on a rough sea. This formation was beautiful in the extreme. Under the graceful folds of each of these "breakers," were fantastic, glistening icicles which shattered the sunlight into every colour of the rainbow. It was very interesting travelling under, round and on top of the "breakers." The snow was inclined to avalanche, and masked crevasses, often rendering them troublesome. Some of them we crossed by lying down and wriggling over.

It was now 4:30 p.m. While we mounted the last lap, which was none too easy, we left the second rope waiting under the summit cornice—as there was not room for more than one rope on the top at a time. The face was very

steep and brittle with an awkward crevasse to negotiate. It was a slow job as only one could move at a time. Surmounting the shoulder of crumbling ice the last fifty feet was somewhat spectacular, as the narrow summit ridge was broken ice covered with snow.

“Conrad’s on top, thank Heaven!” I thought, for he was gathering up my slack fast. As I stepped up beside him he held my rope and said in a very satisfying tone, “There! Lady! you are the first woman on the top of Mr. Robson.” I said out loud “Thank Heaven!” for it was a four-year-old ambition at last achieved.

No permanent record can be left on the summit, but we found the film pack tab from Mr. Pollard’s camera stuck in the snow on top. The view in some respects was disappointing, although I might have expected it as I have been on high mountains before. Everything else was dwarfed as we were 2,000 feet above the next highest mountain. The névé of the Tumbling Glacier seemed at our very feet. The Helmet, which looks so impressive from Berg Lake, appeared flattened out, so all sides of it were visible. The wee white specks of the tents of the Main Camp on Robson Pass made “home” and comfort look a long way off. Range upon range of mountains were spread out beneath us, beckoning and tempting.

The hour now being very late and the atmosphere frosty we took a last good look at the magnificent surroundings and said *au revoir* to the summit.

We passed the second rope and kept on down while they continued the ascent. Fortunately the frost had greatly lessened the dangers, by freezing our footsteps more solidly, making the descent easier than I had expected. No particular difficulty was encountered crossing the big broken crevasse although extreme care had to be taken. On the glacier below we found our tracks all obliterated by heavy avalanche snow. The ice wall reached again, I felt somewhat like a spider as I turned with a twist and lowered myself slowly over the edge to feel for the first foothold—

not such an easy task when backing down. Both ropes passed under the ice wall again in perfect safety. This made one feel as if all troubles were over. Not so for us, though, as we later found.

At the edge of the glacier we unroped and started down the rocks. In the dusk it was slow work and not easy with such a large party. With the gathering smoke from a bush fire and a thunder storm in the west, darkness was approaching faster than usual, so Conrad decided to take to the glacier again. He left us at the edge of the rocks to rope up again in readiness while he cut steps with wonderful speed, then returned and we were all soon on the lower glacier. For my part I was very glad as we could travel so much farther down by the reflected light from the snow and ice. I had noticed in the morning that this glacier couldn't be badly crevassed, as it was really nothing but an avalanche chute of the ice-cap above, so all big crevasses would be filled up.

The most thrilling part was getting off the glacier—just above the lower ice wall, back to the rocks again. Conrad unroped and found the only possible way, I believe, then came back for us. It was necessary to cross a six-inch wide bridge. A few feet further was a black hole to be crossed by a leap to an unseen foothold in the higher opposite wall. The grunting and the vibration of the ice around us was all too unpleasant in the darkness. Conrad personally assisted the crossing of each person. All this was on the very brink of the lower ice wall. Steps were cut down again to a rock ledge where we decided to stay for the rest of the night, an elevation of 9,500 feet. It was now about 10:30 p.m. We finished the rest of our food, changed into dry socks, and tried to sleep in spasms between the rolling echoes of falling ice from the glacier wall we had so recently outflanked.

We were mighty thankful there was no rain or snow, as clouds were down on the glacier and all the shoulders and cliffs of the mountain were hidden.

Groans were heard from nearly every member of the party as we started our cold, stiffened limbs into action at about 3:30 a.m. After all we had experienced the passage under the lower ice wall made little impression on us although the ledges were covered with newly-fallen ice. On arriving in camp at 5 a.m. we found the ever faithful Herbert Newcomb and the next climbing party (Miss Gold, Mr. Lindsay and Mr. Montgomery) had prepared a delightful breakfast for us.

Knowing if we stayed in High Camp any length of time we should require another meal, and not wishing to deplete the precious provisions, we left about seven and reached Lake Kinney Camp a little after eight, where we prepared a good second breakfast. Shortly after we started the long, long trail to Main Camp which we reached about 2 p.m., having been on the go almost thirty-five hours since 3:30 a.m. the previous day, with the exception of the five hours rest (?) on the rocks the night before.

We were touched by the warmth and sincerity of the welcome received from all those in camp.

One is denied opportunity of studying the many interesting details of such a magnificent mountain when roped together, so that my ambition was then, and still is, to climb Mt. Robson again.