Canada’s Everest? Rethinking the First Ascent of Mount Logan and the Politics of Nationhood, 1925

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In the early decades of the twentieth century, Canadian mountaineering progressed largely independently of the European mainstream. During this era, however, one British endeavour captured the imagination of North American climbers and, for the first time, propelled mountaineering into western popular culture: the struggle that began in the early 1920s to climb the highest mountain in the world, Mount Everest (8,852 m). Being able to claim the first ascent of Mt. Everest was of paramount importance to Britain, a preoccupation that lasted nearly half a century. After two earlier unsuccessful attempts, the British made a third attempt in 1924 via the mountain’s north ridge. All hopes were resting on George Leigh Mallory—the so-called “Gallahad” of the British mountaineering fraternity—and his young, inexperienced climbing partner, Andrew Irvine. Clad in tweed suits and puttees, the two men left for the summit on the morning of June 8 but never returned. News of the death of Mallory and Irvine deeply moved many people in the West, with one editorial reflecting nationally:

In the days of peace, England will always hold some who are not content with humdrum routine and soft living. The spirit, which animated the attacks on Everest, is the same as that which has prompted arctic and other expeditions, and in earlier times led to the formation of the Empire itself. Who shall say that any of its manifestations are not worthwhile? Who shall say that its inspiration has not a far-reaching influence on the race? It is certain that it would grow rusty with disuse, and expeditions like the attempt to scale Everest serve to whet the sword of ambition and courage.¹

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The spirit of the early Mt. Everest expeditions incited North American climbers to action in 1925. Under the organizational auspices of The Alpine Club of Canada (ACC), climbers representing the national alpine clubs of Canada, the United States, and Britain rallied together for the conquest of Mount Logan (5,959 m), the highest unclimbed mountain on the North American continent. According to long-time ACC director Arthur O. Wheeler, they went boldly forth, “following the example of The Alpine Club (England) in its endeavour to climb the highest mountain in the world.”

A close look at this celebrated ascent and how it was represented by the expedition members and the popular press in Canada and abroad reveals that, behind romantic ideals of exploration and adventure, there lurked a less innocent side to climbing. In the case of early twentieth-century mountaineering, it was the larger political agenda associated with international power relations of the era. The theoretical orientation of this article stems chiefly from Rueben Ellis’ Vertical Margins: Mountaineering and the Landscapes of Neoimperialism (2001). Ellis explored the various conventions of the modern mountaineering narrative to suggest that they “can be read as expressing the ideology of European and U.S. expansionism in the modern period, a phenomena often referred to as the new imperialism.” In its representation, the conquest of Mt. Logan served to heighten the awareness of national identities—conceptually and technologically—as an assertion of summit nationalism, a conspicuous act of claiming whereby nationalist identities were forged and propagated on the unclimbed summits of the world. Whereas an analysis of the ascent demonstrates the positioning of mountaineering as both an extension of imperial conquest and an assertion of Canadian nationhood, it simultaneously places on view the shifting balance of Canada’s interwar external relations away from Britain and towards an emerging neoimperialist America.

Mountaineering as Exploration

Originally associated with the spiritual and aesthetic quests of late-eighteenth-century Romantic poets, mountaineering narratives began to change by the mid-nineteenth century as climbing mountains became the leisure sport of gentleman and a means of pursuing scientific investigation. The language used to narrate mountaineering became exceedingly understated as Victorian mountaineers downplayed the character of adventure, risk, and exploit when describing events that, according to Ellis, “we all know are more exciting and frightening than the writer lets on.” Gone were the “revelations of the inner self” that had been characteristic of mountain writing and poetry, as the genre of mountaineering prose became formal and restrained.

By the end of the century, however, writing about mountaineering took another direction. British and European climbers had slowly ventured