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Honors Thesis

**WOMEN AND GENDER IN  
MOUNTAINEERING AND CLIMBING**

by  
Natalie Diane Gunn

Submitted to Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment  
of graduation requirements for University Honors

History Department  
Brigham Young University  
December 2023

Advisor: Dr. Andrew Johns  
Honors Coordinator: Dr. Daren Ray



## ABSTRACT

### WOMEN AND GENDER IN MOUNTAINEERING AND CLIMBING

Natalie Diane Gunn

Department of History

Bachelor of Arts, College of Family, Home, and Social Sciences

This thesis examines how gender and ideas about gender affected early female mountaineers and rock climbers. The study focuses on female dress standards in the Victorian era, the relative equity of accomplishment between male and female mountaineers and climbers, the portrayal of female climbers in the media, and the misrepresentation of female motivations for climbing. By analyzing primary sources from female climbers and mountaineers, this paper uncovers how women challenged traditional gender roles and navigated the complexities of the male-dominated climbing community.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to express my gratitude to the incredible women whose inspiring stories have shaped this thesis. I deeply admire the female mountaineers and climbers who have challenged societal norms and pursued their passion for the outdoors.

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## Introduction

Yosemite Valley's sky is ruled by its big walls: El Capitan and Half Dome. Widely recognized as the most iconic cliffs in the world, those 3,000+ foot granite peaks make Yosemite the center of the climbing universe. In the 1970s, a wave of athleticism overtook the valley, propelling climbers to ascend Yosemite's walls without any upward aid, only a protective rope in case of a fall. Completing a free-ascent of any of Yosemite's walls is still considered a terrific athletic feat, but being the very first automatically qualifies the climber for the history books. In 1979, the world's best climbers started to attempt free-climbing the most challenging route on El Capitan: "The Nose." Fourteen years later, in the early fall of 1993, a five foot two inches tall, one-hundred and ten-pound woman named Lynn Hill stared down the 3,000-foot giant and clinched the title of "first to free-climb the Nose." In response to this achievement, famed German climber Alex Huber said that Hill had "passed men's dominance in climbing and left them behind."<sup>1</sup> Case in point, it took an additional thirteen years before Tommy Caldwell made the first male ascent of the same formidable route.<sup>2</sup> When Hill reached the top of the Nose, she famously stated, "It goes boys." Hill's comment suggests that her impressive climbing career was not shaped just by her skill and accomplishments, but also by her gender.

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<sup>1</sup> Gripped Magazine, "Lynn Hill Freed El Cap in a Day in 1994," *Gripped Magazine*, November 8, 2020, <https://gripped.com/uncategorized/lynn-hill-freed-el-cap-in-a-day-in-1994/#:~:text=She%20ran%20out%20of%20chalk>.

<sup>2</sup> Gripped Magazine, "History of Free Climbing the Nose 5.14 on El Capitan," *Gripped Magazine*, July 1, 2022, <https://gripped.com/routes/history-of-free-climbing-the-nose-5-14-on-el-capitan/>.

For Lynn Hill and many other female climbers, their experiences in the climbing world were often affected by their gender. Traditionally, mainstream sports come with a male-dominated hierarchy of leagues, coaches, and players—making it near impossible for women to attempt competing alongside men. In contrast, the arenas of highest acclaim for climbers cannot physically be kept from women, as the mountains belong to no man. Women have ascended the highest peaks, climbed the hardest grades, and claimed many notable first ascents. Because specific routes, mountain peaks, and grades define the measures of success in mountaineering and climbing, there should be no question about the competency of female climbers. Nevertheless, Lynn Hill and other female athletes still faced discrimination on account of their gender. Critics targeted female mountaineers and climbers for defying gender conventions; they questioned their motives for climbing, and the media and history underrepresented their achievements. This paper aims to explore the ways that gender and ideas about gender shaped women's experiences in mountaineering and climbing.

First, it is vital to explore the uniqueness of mountaineering and rock climbing as athletic endeavors.<sup>3</sup> In mainstream sports, such as track, basketball, football, and soccer, there is usually a marked performance difference between the genders. This athletic “gender gap” can typically be attributed to the physical differences between men and women. On average, men are taller, have lower body fat percentages, and have larger hearts and lungs—all of which give them a competitive advantage over women.

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<sup>3</sup> Mountaineering is defined as climbing mountains, occasionally using rigged rope systems for aid or safety. Rock climbing evolved out of mountaineering and consists of vertically climbing mountains, almost always using ropes as a necessary safety feature. Since climbing evolved from mountaineering, the experiences of female mountaineers and climbers are very similar. Rock climbing is a 20<sup>th</sup>-century sport, so mountaineers and climbers have been grouped in this paper to allow for a longer study time frame.

However, the “gender gap” is much smaller in rock climbing. Several women are in the top one hundred rock climbers, which is “a trend not found in any other major sport.”<sup>4</sup>

This phenomenon can be seen

visually through Collin

Carroll’s graph comparing the number of male athletes who precede the top female athlete in climbing versus sprinting.

Using a log scale as the y-axis showcases how vast the

difference is between the two

sports.

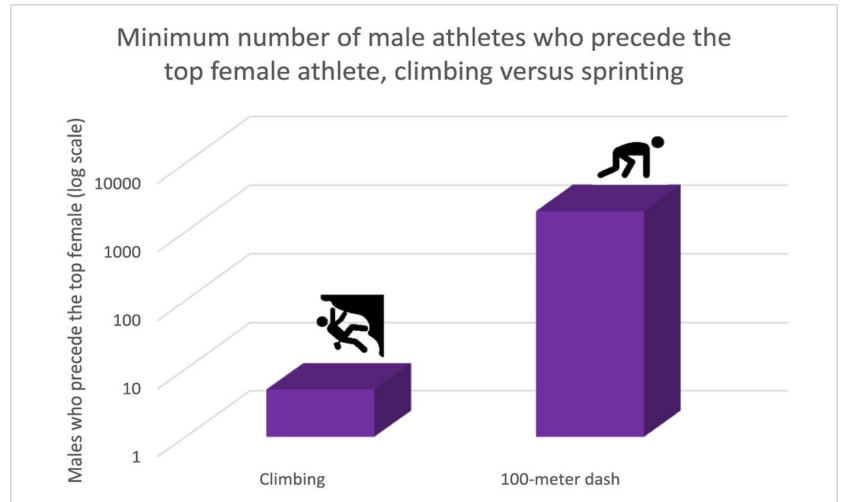


Figure 1

The apparent difference between climbing and gender performance in other major sports could be explained by the fact that mountaineering and climbing do not favor any specific skill set or body type. In some physical aspects, a typical woman enjoys a slight advantage over an average male climber.<sup>5</sup> For example, it is well-known within the climbing community that having smaller fingers can be a considerable advantage for climbing routes with small, “crimpy” holds.<sup>6</sup> Placing a larger proportion of a finger pad onto a hold allows climbers to pull themselves up vertically with greater ease. In physics,

<sup>4</sup> Collin Carroll, “Female Excellence in Rock Climbing Likely Has an Evolutionary Origin,” *Current Research in Physiology* 4 (February 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.crphys.2021.01.004>.

<sup>5</sup> Dianne Chisholm, “Climbing like a Girl: An Exemplary Adventure in Feminist Phenomenology,” *Hypatia* 23, no. 1 (February 2008): 9–40, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2008.tb01164.x>.

<sup>6</sup> Sander DiAngelis, “Rock Climbing Terms and Dictionary,” *Moja Gear*, May 12, 2014, <https://mojagear.com/rock-climbing-dictionary-terms-slang/#:~:text=Crimp>.

the equation  $\tau = FL$  defines torque, where torque equals force multiplied by distance.

When a climber can proportionally place a greater length or amount of their finger onto a hold, their torque amplifies in comparison to climbers with larger fingers. Simply put, small holds feel larger to small fingers. The same is true for smaller feet and small footholds.

Further, women are typically smaller than men. Since climbing requires significant endurance, carrying less body weight can reduce the energy expended. Climbers who climb efficiently and expend less energy can climb for extended periods without getting tired. Less weight can also increase a climber's strength-to-weight ratio, and many elite climbers have low percentages of body mass and body fat.<sup>7</sup> Climbers with less weight can generate more power per unit of body weight, which can be helpful when attempting complex moves or holding onto small handholds or footholds.<sup>8</sup> Many elite climbers are intentionally smaller and leaner to tap into this advantage.

Lastly, some of the most successful female climbers have relied on their exceptional flexibility to complete challenging routes. Lynn Hill, Margo Hayes (the first woman to climb 5.15a), and Natalia Grossman (seven-time gold medalist at Climbing World Cup events) were all practiced gymnasts before becoming rock climbers.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Luisa V Giles, Edward C Rhodes, and Jack E Taunton, "The Physiology of Rock Climbing," *Sports Medicine* 36, no. 6 (2006): 529–45, <https://doi.org/10.2165/00007256-200636060-00006>.

<sup>8</sup> Phillip B. Watts, "Physiology of Difficult Rock Climbing," *European Journal of Applied Physiology* 91, no. 4 (April 1, 2004): 361–72, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00421-003-1036-7>.

<sup>9</sup> American rock climbing uses the Yosemite Decimal System, a scale that progresses from 5.1-5.9, then 5.10a-d all the way up to 5.15b. Climbers establish climbing grades by consensus. In order to create a new grade, a new route must be set that surpasses the current abilities of the entire climbing community. In 2017, Adam Ondra set the world's first 5.15d, which remains the world's most challenging grade. Currently, in 2023, Adam Ondra and Sébastien Bouin are the only two people to climb routes rated 5.15d. There are only two 5.15d routes in existence, both set by the climbers mentioned above. In 2021, Laura Rogora climbed a 5.15b/c, making her the first woman to climb at that level.

Gymnastics emphasizes flexibility, which creates a substantial advantage in rock climbing. For example, many rock climbers practice heel hooks: a move where the climber places their heel on a ledge near their waist and then rolls their weight onto their foot.<sup>10</sup> Ultra-flexible climbers can place their heels much higher than their waist, allowing them to apply a heel hook where less-flexible climbers cannot. Recently, flexibility has become widely recognized as an essential training component for all climbers.<sup>11</sup> On average, women tend to be more flexible than men, which makes flexibility another physical advantage for women.<sup>12</sup> Overall, these physical differences do not give women a complete advantage over men, but it does significantly lessen the performance gap between the genders.

When it comes to male advantages in climbing, anatomy plays the most significant role. Additionally, men typically have increased arm spans relative to their height (ape index), increased muscle mass, larger heart and lungs, higher levels of testosterone, and a smaller percentage of body fat compared to biological women. These factors tend to aid men in speed, strength, and power. For example, having a longer ape index means an athlete has an increased reach, which can positively alter their climbing style. When a female would have to resort to flexibility and holding on to smaller holds, a

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<sup>10</sup> Neil Gresham, "SKILLS: Technique - Heel Hooking," *UK Climbing*, October 12, 2018, [https://www.ukclimbing.com/articles/skills/series/neil\\_gresham\\_technique\\_and\\_training/technique\\_-\\_heel\\_hooking-11327](https://www.ukclimbing.com/articles/skills/series/neil_gresham_technique_and_training/technique_-_heel_hooking-11327).

<sup>11</sup> Neil Gresham, "A Faster, Safer Way to Get Stronger?," *Outside Magazine*, September 12, 2022, <https://www.climbing.com/skills/flexibility-training-improvement/#:~:text=Climbing%20your%20best%20isn>.

<sup>12</sup> Suiqing Yu et al., "Gender Difference in Effects of Proprioceptive Neuromuscular Facilitation Stretching on Flexibility and Stiffness of Hamstring Muscle," *Frontiers in Physiology* 13, no. 918176 (July 22, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fphys.2022.918176>.



male could reach higher and further to a larger hold.<sup>13</sup> In sports where speed and strength are high performance indicators, men have an advantage over women. In contrast, climbing competency is not a result of a single physical metric but a “complex interaction of physiological and psychological factors,” effectively allowing women to compete at the highest levels of the discipline.<sup>14</sup>

Non-physical aspects play a role as well. Climbing routes vary significantly in style and composition. Routes of the same difficulty could exhibit crimp holds that favor balance and precision or large holds that require dynamic movement and physical strength. Based on the route style, women may have an easier time on routes that would be more challenging for men and vice versa. In the same way that climbing routes vary, climbing beta can vary widely as well.<sup>15</sup> There is no “correct way” to finish a climb. Instead, there are multiple valid ways to leverage personal advantages against the route.

For example, when Alexander Huber bolted *La Rambla*—one of the world's only 5.15s in 1994—the climb required height and power. In February of 2017, only fifteen men had completed the route. Footage of Matty Hong, Enzo Oddo, and Alex Huber on *La Rambla* shows that often, their feet would swing off of the wall after a dynamic move.<sup>16</sup> These climbers used explosive, powerful moves to ascend the wall. Margo Hayes, a 5' 2" climber from Colorado, completed the climb quite differently. Her feet were often at or

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<sup>13</sup> Phillip B. Watts, David T. Martin, and Shirley Durtschi, “Anthropometric Profiles of Elite Male and Female Competitive Sport Rock Climbers,” *Journal of Sports Sciences* 11, no. 2 (April 1993): 113–17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02640419308729974>.

<sup>14</sup> Giles, Rhodes, and Taunton, “The Physiology of Rock Climbing,” 529–45.

<sup>15</sup> Beta refers to information about how to ascend a specific climb.

<sup>16</sup> prAna, “Enzo Oddo: La Rambla 9a+ (5.15a) at Siurana Spain,” *YouTube*, January 13, 2012, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s3-nLPB\\_pXk&t=148s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s3-nLPB_pXk&t=148s), Petzl Sport, “Matty Hong in Spain,” *Vimeo*, October 6, 2017, <https://vimeo.com/237122684>, Outdoor Sin Límite, “Alex Huber La Rambla 8c+ Siurana | Era 1994,” *Facebook*, January 20, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1635000860086502>.

above her head, leveraging her flexibility to make the route work for her.<sup>17</sup> Watching Hayes complete the route showcases her climbing style: flexible, precise, and controlled. When she finished the route, she became the first female to climb 5.15a.<sup>18</sup> Hayes' contrasting approach highlights how women can complete climbing routes of extreme difficulty by utilizing flexibility.

Given the relatively small athletic gap between male and female climbers, climbing becomes a fascinating case study on gender dynamics. The comparably equal levels of accomplishment between male and female climbers begs the question that if the sports arena is based solely on ability, what happens when women's ability is often comparable or sometimes above men? One might think that since they can accomplish equally, they are treated equally. History has shown, however, that gender significantly impacted the athletic experiences of female mountaineers and climbers despite their comparable levels of accomplishment.

### **Historiography**

Many pioneering mountaineers were concerned with their place in history, so they left copious records of their accomplishments. There is no shortage of aggrandized accounts of alpine ascents with titles like: “Eiger: Wall of Death,” “The Himalayas: Playground of the Gods,” and “The Thunder Dragon Kingdom: A Mountaineering

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<sup>17</sup> Morteza Norouzi, “Margo Hayes La Rambla 9a+ 5.15a,” *YouTube*, March 7, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=49hU8qns6WY>.

<sup>18</sup> Liz Haas, “Margo Hayes Climbs La Rambla, Becomes First Woman to Send 5.15a,” *Outside Magazine*, February 27, 2017, <https://www.climbing.com/news/margo-hayes-climbs-la-rambla-becomes-first-woman-to-send-515a/>.

Expedition to Bhutan.”<sup>19</sup> Compared to the prolific number of male-authored autobiographies, comprehensive histories of mountaineering and climbing are less readily available. Clinton Thomas Dent’s *Mountaineering*, first published in 1892, is considered the first attempt at a comprehensive mountaineering history. Dent’s work details notable ascents from the Golden Age of Alpinism (1854-1865) until 1892. The work also serves as an instruction manual for aspiring mountaineers. Although female mountaineers were active during this period and claimed their first ascents, Dent’s history does not mention any female accomplishments.

Various memoirs and personal papers show the intense involvement of the female mountaineers who were contemporaries of Dent. In the same year, one climber said that while climbing in the high Alps, “you get accustomed to living in a sort of feminine Utopia, where the ladies climb in knickerbockers and...of course, think nothing of going unattended.”<sup>20</sup> One historian noted that during 1850 – 1900, women comprised a “distinct, autonomous and active presence” in the Alps and claimed mountain ascents “occasionally in advance of men.”<sup>21</sup>

Dent does include a section titled “Climbing Outfits for Ladies” that defines the proper attire for women engaged in mountaineering. This inclusion is notable because it suggests Dent did not see mountaineering as a sport closed off to women. However, he

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<sup>19</sup> Arthur J. Roth, *Eiger, Wall of Death* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1982); M.S. Kohli, *The Himalayas: Playground of the Gods* (New Delhi: Indus Publishing Co, 2000); and Steven K. Berry, *The Thunder Dragon Kingdom: A Mountaineering Expedition to Bhutan* (Seattle: Cloudcap, 1988).

<sup>20</sup> Barbara Cutter, “A Feminine Utopia: Mountain Climbing, Gender, and Women’s Rights in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Journal of Women’s History* 33, no. 2 (2021): 84, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2021.0015>.

<sup>21</sup> Clare Roche, “The Ascent of Women: How Female Mountaineers Explored the Alps 1850-1900” (Doctoral Thesis 2016, 7) <http://vufind.lib.bbk.ac.uk/vufind/Record/543287>.

did not include any of their accomplishments in his comprehensive history.<sup>22</sup> Further, Dent's strict dress requirements for both men and women showcase the influence of proper Victorian society on mountaineering.<sup>23</sup> Overall, other comprehensive histories read similarly to Dent's *Mountaineering* by privileging the stories of men and largely ignoring women. Only recently did historians begin to focus on the gendered aspect of mountaineering history.

Susan Rogers wrote in the 1987 Women's Edition of *Climbing Magazine*, "That the history of women climbers is silent... is no surprise. It duplicates the pre-feminist history of people—men—in any activity outside the home. As with all women's studies, women have to be sought after, rediscovered, and placed in their rightful position of accomplishment."<sup>24</sup> In the 1990s, Rogers stated that women were "sought after...and rediscovered" as they were given serious consideration in mountaineering literature. It is important to acknowledge that the field of history on women mountaineers and climbers has been limited, especially considering that historians only began to focus on gendered perspectives in the 1990s.

Published in 1994, David Mazel's *Mountaineering Women: Stories by Early Climbers* is primarily a collection of excerpts from female mountaineers from 1850-1955 coupled with Mazel's analyses.<sup>25</sup> By looking at the history of mountaineering through a

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<sup>22</sup> Clinton Thomas Dent, *Mountaineering* (London: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1892).

<sup>23</sup> The Victorian Era, roughly 1820 – 1914, was characterized by a strong emphasis on propriety, morality, modesty, and social hierarchy, with distinct gender roles and a focus on etiquette and decorum.

<sup>24</sup> Susan Rogers, "Finding a Positive History: Perspective on Women Role Models," *Climbing*, 1987.

<sup>25</sup> David Mazel, ed., *Mountaineering Women: Stories by Early Climbers* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1994).

gender-specific lens, Mazel adds an important set of insights and arguments to mountaineering literature. Namely, he contends that for many women, the patronizing “male belief in female inferiority” held them back from being anything but “second-rate climbers,” women’s rights and suffrage were connected to the motivations of many female mountaineers, and “when women climb[ed] well...they challenge[d] not just individual male egos but the whole constellation of assumptions about gender in society.”<sup>26</sup> Primarily, Mazel lets the women speak for themselves. His work is the first collection of mountaineering voices dedicated to explaining the female experience.

Similarly, *Women Climbing: 200 Years of Achievement*, published in 1989 by Bill Birkett and Bill Peascod, emphasizes the impressive role that women have played throughout mountaineering history. The *Women Climbing* project began when the male authors saw a picture of Catherine Destivelle, a French climbing phenom, in a climbing magazine and instinctively thought to themselves, “How can a woman, a mere girl, so obviously feminine, climb that hard?!”<sup>27</sup> Realizing that their unconscious assumptions had led them to believe that feminine women did not climb hard, the authors sought to right their wrongs by creating a history dedicated to women. Birkett and Peascod combined the stories of early mountaineers, such as Lucy Walker, with late twentieth-century rock climbers and mountaineers, such as Junko Tabei, Wanda Rutkiewicz, and Catherine Destivelle. *Women Climbing* is unique in its global reach, including stories from Australia, Russia, Switzerland, France, Japan, Poland, Britain, and the United States.

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<sup>26</sup> Mazel, *Mountaineering Women*, 14.

<sup>27</sup> Bill Birkett and Bill Peascod, *Women Climbing: 200 Years of Achievement* (London: A&C Black, 1989), 11.

Rachel da Silva continues the work of Mazel, Peascod, and Birkett by broadening her timeframe and demographic to include accounts from lesser-known female climbers into the 1990s. Unlike previous scholars mainly focused on well-known women in America and Europe, Da Silva called for climbing experiences written by women of every nationality and level of skill. Da Silva's 1992 publication, *Women Climbers: Reaching for the Top*, begins with her stating that “the need for a comprehensive collection of women's writing on climbing seemed obvious” due to the absence of female rock climbers in contemporary media.<sup>28</sup> Da Silva sought to correct this unequal distribution by publishing accounts of female climbers as early as Miriam O'Brien Underhill and her 1929 account of “Manless Climbing,” but primarily gives space to female climbers in the 1960s-1990s. Notably, The Seal Press published Da Silva's collection, providing a platform for women writers and feminist issues, thus highlighting the works' close ties to female empowerment. Da Silva's most significant contribution was seeking out stories from female climbers of varying abilities rather than exclusively sharing the stories of professional female climbers.

Joseph E. Taylor III's *Pilgrims of the Vertical* is an important addition to gender-focused climbing literature due to his analysis of the relations between men and women in Yosemite National Park. Yosemite is a significant location due to its prominence in the climbing world; most of America's elite climbers made their careers in Yosemite, with rare exceptions. While Taylor primarily focuses on the relationship between man and nature, he also provides his own analysis of how male climbers in Yosemite viewed

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<sup>28</sup> Rachel Da Silva, ed., *Leading Out: Women Climbers Reaching for the Top* (Seattle: Seal Press, 1992), xvii.

women. Taylor contends that within Yosemite's climbing culture, “beyond sex, women were often afterthoughts.”<sup>29</sup> Further, Yosemite men blurred “walls and women...into a sexualized discourse of things “to do.”<sup>30</sup> Violent and sexual language bled into the way male climbers talked about Yosemite, referring to “her” walls as “virgin” lines that “drove them wild with desire.”<sup>31</sup>

Taylor also draws on the story of Penny Carr to showcase the toxic masculine culture that persisted in the early 1960s. Yosemite men were largely unable to engage in fulfilling, genuine relationships with their female peers, which led to a culture of exclusivity. Following the sinking self-realization that Carr would “never be an equal among those who mattered” (meaning, male climbers), she quietly pumped exhaust into her car, killing herself in May 1966.<sup>32</sup> By focusing on the male viewpoint, Taylor's work increases the understanding of the unfriendly environment that female climbers often encountered as they climbed in Yosemite.

Scholar Laura Martínez-García's 2020 research further examines the masculine identity of male climbers in Yosemite. Martínez-García contends that the masculine culture within Yosemite's famous Camp Four was not separated from society as many climbers have claimed, but rather, a “microcosm reflecting social and cultural changes.”<sup>33</sup> Few scholars have attempted to connect climbing culture to the greater societal trends

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<sup>29</sup> Joseph E. Taylor III, *Pilgrims of the Vertical: Yosemite Rock Climbers and Nature at Risk* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 144.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>33</sup> Laura Martínez-García, “Transgressing Geographical and Gender Borders: A Study of Alternative Manhoods in Yosemite's Climbing History,” *Miscelánea: A Journal of English and American Studies* 62 (July 2020), 51.

seen in the United States, which makes Martínez-García's work exceptionally important. Martínez-García asserts that power held by male climbers rotated through each era of climbing,<sup>34</sup> With subsequent groups unseating their predecessors and placing their own "ideologies of gender and sport" on the people of the Valley.<sup>35</sup> In the late 1980s, women broke the climbing glass ceiling by ascending the same climbing grades as the best men in the world, which effectively disrupted the hegemonic masculine culture in Yosemite.<sup>36</sup> This is the first period where single women comprise the majority of elite female climbers, effectively creating a new gender dynamic within Yosemite. My paper aims to build off the limited work on female mountaineers and climbers by identifying gender-specific barriers for women and analyzing how they have evolved.

### **Challenging Gender Conventions: Independence & Athleticism**

In the last two centuries, female mountaineers have challenged conventions within society and their sport. When female mountaineers began ascending peaks in the mid-nineteenth century, their athleticism and independence were frowned upon in the Victorian Era, roughly 1820 - 1914. In Barbara Welter's seminal work, "Cult of True Womanhood," she states that society considered an acceptable woman to be pious, pure, domestic, and submissive during this period.<sup>37</sup> Society expected women to find fulfillment

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<sup>34</sup> Yosemite rock climbing comprises the following eras: the Golden Age, 1953-1970; The Stone Masters, 1973-1980; The Stone Monkeys, 1998-present.

<sup>35</sup> Martínez-García, "Transgressing Geographical and Gender Borders," 51.

<sup>36</sup> "Sending" is a colloquial term used in the climbing community that means completing a route.

<sup>37</sup> Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1966): 151-74, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2711179>.



in the “instinctive arts of child-rearing, domestic pursuits, and spiritual comfort.”<sup>38</sup>

Mountaineering, an intense athletic endeavor, was not seen as an instinctive female art. Popular society emphasized women's obedience and determined that their “proper sphere” was in the home.<sup>39</sup> Female mountaineers did not stay in their homes but instead took to the mountains, exiting their appropriate sphere and contradicting commonly held societal ideals about a woman's role. As they engaged in mountaineering, they encountered gender-based roadblocks and pushed back on societal norms.

The popularly held idea of female dependence on men was a significant barrier for aspiring female mountaineers. In explaining how a “true woman” should feel, a Victorian man explained that “She feels herself weak and timid. She needs a protector. She is, in a measure, dependent.”<sup>40</sup> Corroborating his claim, Grace Greenwood wrote in an 1850 essay that the “true feminine genius is ever timid, doubtful, and clingingly dependent; a perpetual childhood.”<sup>41</sup> A woman independently engaged in any sphere outside the home or church posed a threat to these clearly defined gender roles. One such independent woman, who we only know as “Mrs. Henry Warwick Cole,” recorded that when offered assistance on the final few steps of Monte Rosa (15,203 feet), she “saucily declined the proffered help” because she did not want to say she ascended with any

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<sup>38</sup> Susan Crucea, “Changing Ideals of Womanhood during the Nineteenth-Century Woman Movement,” *University Writing Program Faculty Publications* 19, no. 3 (September 1, 2005): 189. [https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/gsw\\_pub/1](https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/gsw_pub/1).

<sup>39</sup> Martha Vicinus, *A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women* (1977; repr., London: Routledge, 2013), 17.

<sup>40</sup> Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood,” 159.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

assistance.<sup>42</sup> In doing so, Cole rejected the idea that she was weak or dependent on the help of men. Women engaged in alpinism, a masculine activity, proved themselves to have a form of independence that broke with societal norms. Although alpinism was already a step outside of conventionality for women, many female mountaineers had to decline male help in order to find independence while mountaineering.

The prevailing belief was that women were physically frail and in need of protection.<sup>43</sup> Claude Benson, in his widely read *British Mountaineering*, urges men to understand the physical limits of the women they climb with because he had been told that “Doctors, in this age of feminine athletics, are constantly having girls on their hands who have overdone it, and will never be quite the same again.”<sup>44</sup> Men believed that because women were the “weaker sex,” physical exhaustion was not something from which they could ever recover. Therefore, men must chivalrously offer women help, “Leave the ladies to set the pace, and never hurry them.”<sup>45</sup> Although women were relatively free to take to the mountains, they struggled with gender dynamics while mountaineering. If help is always available, it is difficult for women to ascertain their limits.

Women reacted to this gender dynamic in a variety of ways. Breaking from the tradition of her contemporaries who typically climbed with a male partner, Emily

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<sup>42</sup> Mrs. Henry Warwick Cole, “A Lady’s Tour Round Monte Rosa,” in *Mountaineering Women*, ed. David Mazel (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1994), 29.

<sup>43</sup> Susan Crucea, “Changing Ideals of Womanhood during the Nineteenth-Century Woman Movement,” *University Writing Program Faculty Publications* 19, no. 3 (September 1, 2005): 187, [https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/gsw\\_pub/1](https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/gsw_pub/1).

<sup>44</sup> Claude Ernest Benson, *British Mountaineering* (1909; repr., London: George Routledge & Sons, 2008), <https://archive.org/details/britishmountaine00bens/page/186/mode/2up>, 186.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

Hornby, a 19<sup>th</sup>-century mountaineer, embarked on adventures on her own, employing guides as she went. In the Swiss mountains, she recounted, “I had it all to myself” while stopping in a “lovely little grassy basin.”<sup>46</sup> At the beginning of the twentieth century, Miriam O'Brien Underhill, an early adopter of American climbing, offered an alternative solution to this problem: climbing without men.<sup>47</sup> Her concept of “manless climbing” was formed with the argument that the leader of routes had all the fun because they “solve[d] the immediate problems of technique, tactics, and strategy.” In her book *Give Me the Hills*, Underhill writes that “a person who climbs behind a good leader...may never really learn mountaineering at all...he is, after all, only following.”<sup>48</sup> Underhill sought to give herself those learning opportunities by embarking on all-female expeditions.

Manless climbing did not go forth without criticism. Miriam O'Brien Underhill recounted that a fellow climber, Henry de Segogne, went to “some pains to explain to [her] why a woman could never lead a climb.” Underhill remained unconvinced after listening to Segogne's argument that “women...never bother to...watch competent leaders” because they know they “will never be allowed to lead anyway” and “come walking along behind, looking at the scenery.”<sup>49</sup> While Underhill's concept attracted critiques, her manless climbs attracted many offers of male help.

On August 17th, 1928, Underhill traversed the Aiguille du Grépon (11,424') manless with her partner Alice Damesme. Along the way, the women encountered

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<sup>46</sup> Emily Hornsby, “A Tie on One's Conscience,” in *Mountaineering Women*, ed. David Mazel (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1994), 54.

<sup>47</sup> Doug Martland and Tim Peck, “A Women's Work: Pioneering Climber Miriam Underhill,” *Go East*, March 8, 2021, <https://goeast.ems.com/miriam-underhill-womens-work/>.

<sup>48</sup> Miriam Underhill, *Give Me the Hills* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1973), 149.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

several men from different parties. One group excitedly offered to “throw down a rope” for the unknown women. They politely declined his “superfluous rescue.”<sup>50</sup> Another guide was astonished when he saw two women leading the Mummery Crack, a relatively tricky portion of the Grépon. Although it was custom for tourists to skip the Mummery Crack and ascend in a more accessible manner, the guide remarked to his male tourist, “I don't think that today, since two ladies have climbed the crack from the bottom, it would be appropriate for a man to take an easier route.”<sup>51</sup> Miriam O'Brien Underhill's all-female ascents advocated for a new level of self-reliance among female climbers. They challenged the notion that women only belonged on mountains as followers, not leaders.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, all-female ascents became more common, but the same gender dynamics of female dependence persisted. Kristen Laine, a Yosemite climber in the 1980s, wrote that after having her first female climbing partner, she realized that “With the men, I had instinctively fallen into a passive role.”<sup>52</sup> Or consider the experience of Irene Miller, who had to “assert herself forcefully with male climbers who were perfectly content to “carry her” because society had taught those men to take care of women.”<sup>53</sup> Like the early female mountaineers, these female rock climbers had to decide to become leaders. When climbing with a male partner, their default setting was that of a follower who needed to be taken care of. Another prominent female climber

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.,153.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.,156.

<sup>52</sup> Kristen Laine, “Airborne on Homemade Wings,” in *Leading Out*, ed. Rachel da Silva (Seattle: Seal Press, 1992), 309.

<sup>53</sup> Carroll Seghers, *The Peak Experience: Hiking and Climbing for Women* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1979), 181.

wrote in 1979, “It is only with an all-woman team that you are really being counted on for your share.”<sup>54</sup> In the world of rock climbing, male chivalry held women back.

A young woman named Laura White Brunner experienced similar bouts of well-intentioned chivalry during her time living and working in Yosemite. Brunner is credited as the second woman to hike to the top of Half Dome, one of Yosemite's tallest and most iconic walls. Brunner completed her ascent via the Clothes-Line route—which is what it sounds like, several clothes-lines tied together, allowing hikers to hoist themselves up the trail. After Brunner's ascent, the National Park Service decided to install cables along the backside so that future climbers would have a safe path to the top. Jim Snyder, a Yosemite National Park historian, asserted that the fear of *women* climbing the route motivated the National Park Service to affix permanent aid.<sup>55</sup> He asserts that White's ascent directly motivated the installation of permanent cables. The author of Brunner's biography calls this “possibly...the only sexist trail in existence.”<sup>56</sup>

Carroll Seghers's guidebook, *The Peak Experience: Hiking and Climbing for Women*, further demonstrated the impact of gender on the female climbing experience. Meant to be a book of practicality, *The Peak Experience* demystifies mountain adventures for women by providing helpful information about training, camping, and basic climbing. To help women navigate complicated relationships between climbers, Seghers includes a section on gender dynamics. For instance, Carroll Seghers instructs women on ways that they can “help group male behavior,” such as “not demonstrating

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>55</sup> Laura White Brunner, *Cliffs and Challenges: A Young Woman Explores Yosemite, 1915-1917*, ed. Jared N Champion (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2019), 5–7.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 6.

any particular alliance with any one man...avoid[ing] forming cliques of [only] women” and being aware of the “sensitive or shy males in the group.”<sup>57</sup> Seghers’s inclusion of gender dynamics implies that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, women needed to be cognizant of how their gender influenced their climbing groups.

A 2009 analysis of the gendered experience of elite female climbers bolsters Seghers's writing. The study found that “gaining access and being accepted often involved compliance with hegemonic gender standards” such as physical appearance.<sup>58</sup> Several participants expressed the need to present femininely while climbing with men by wearing tight and attractive clothing and preventing themselves from developing large muscles. The study concluded that “female climbers’ perceptions of culturally ‘appropriate’ feminine bodies” are often at odds with their “feelings about their ‘sport’ bodies.”<sup>59</sup> This analysis highlights the complex relationship between elite female climbers and societal gender norms. Women are required to balance the differing ideals of femininity and athleticism; a burden not born by men, seeing as characteristics of athleticism are largely in line with masculine characteristics.

The assumption that women are the weaker sex has lessened over time. After undergoing the Women's Movement in the 1970s, American society held women in higher esteem. Still, it seems that just as the two women completing the Mummery Crack surprised the Grépon guides, skilled female climbers in latter half of the twentieth century elicited the same response among some male climbers. Lynn Hill, widely recognized as

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<sup>57</sup> Seghers, *The Peak Experience*, 180.

<sup>58</sup> Karen M. Appleby and Leslee A. Fisher, “‘Female Energy at the Rock’: A Feminist Exploration of Female Rock Climbers,” *Women in Sport and Physical Activity Journal* 14, no. 2 (October 2005): 15, <https://doi.org/10.1123/wspaj.14.2.10>.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

one of the world's greatest climbers, recounted an illustrative experience while climbing outdoors in the 1970s. After completing a complex boulder problem, a man dismissively commented to Hill, “Gee, even I can't do that.” and stalked off. Hill wrote that “his assumption seemed to be that as a man, he should automatically be physically superior to a small girl and seemed put out to see the 'weaker sex' outdo him.”<sup>60</sup> The man’s assumptions about Hill’s ability could not have been tied to anything other than her size and gender, for that is all he knew about her.

Similarly, Catherine Destivelle, a French phenom, found herself repeatedly underestimated while climbing at outdoor crags. Many who observed Destivelle assumed that the route could not be too difficult, seeing as a petite female had just climbed it. Subsequently, Destivelle noted that “many climbers would try to do the same routes” she had just completed. Destivelle did not mind, as she found it “very funny” to see average male climbers attempt to follow her routes.<sup>61</sup> Bill Peascod, who has accompanied Destivelle climbing, wrote that frequently, the men who followed her found themselves “out of control, unable to retreat...scream[ing] through the air grasping the reality that this girl was indeed a gifted climber.”<sup>62</sup> At the root of these two experiences is an unconscious assumption that women are still the weaker sex. Had the aforementioned men begun without a gendered assumption, it seems plausible to assume that they would have been less surprised by Hill and Destivelle’s climbing success. Although the early female mountaineers embarked almost one hundred and fifty years before the modern

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<sup>60</sup> Lynn Hill and Greg Child, *Climbing Free: My Life in the Vertical World* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003), 43-44.

<sup>61</sup> Birkett and Peascod, *Women Climbing*, 152.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

rock climbers of the 1970s-90s, these women still shared a similar set of challenges in the form of female dependence and assumptions about female athleticism.

### **Challenging Gender Conventions: Dress & Appearance**

Dress and appearance are other aspects of gender conventions that greatly impacted female mountaineers. In Victorian society, specific and restrictive dress codes assigned to women highlighted obedience, restraint, and modesty. Proper attire included heavy, floor-length skirts that caused women to complain of “overheating and impaired breathing, sweeping along filthy streets, tripping over stairs...and crushed organs.”<sup>63</sup> Failure to comply did not only mean a rejection of the dress itself but the standards of womanhood. No exceptions were made for female mountaineers. Although female climbers persisted in their adventures, the gendered Victorian dress code was an inconvenient barrier that physically slowed women down while mountaineering.

Women were forced to adapt their clothing to safely travel while mountaineering. “Traveling dresses” were popular among climbers, as they allowed women to hoist their skirts to an appropriate height through a complex system of hidden ropes and hoops. These dresses were created specifically for female climbers, showing that mountaineering had a direct impact on dress. Clinton Dent wrote in his 1892 mountaineering history that “When climbing, the skirt must, whatever its length, be looped up, and therefore it is easy to have a skirt which...does not look conspicuous,” suggesting that men accepted the way

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<sup>63</sup> Lorraine Boissoneault, “Amelia Bloomer Didn’t Mean to Start a Fashion Revolution, but Her Name Became Synonymous with Trousers,” *Smithsonian*, May 24, 2018, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/amelia-bloomer-didnt-mean-start-fashion-revolution-her-name-became-synonymous-trousers-180969164/>.



that women modified their dress to engage in mountaineering.<sup>64</sup> His words suggest that he found the added weight and difficulty of traveling dresses acceptable for women. These female mountaineers now had three options for their dress: they could jimmy-rig small hoops within the fabric of a skirt and hoist the skirt to the length needed to climb a mountain, bravely stash the skirt behind a rock to be retrieved upon completion of the climb, or mountaineer in a potentially dangerous floor-length dress. Although progress came slowly, women were presented with more than one option, an improvement from the whale-bone corset era of the 1850s.

Elizabeth Le Blond, an accomplished Irish mountaineer, was thought to have ascended over one hundred mountain peaks while wearing a skirt. Later, Le Blond revealed that she would stash her skirt part way up her intended climb to be retrieved later. She recollects, “I had an awkward experience connected with climbing dress having left my skirt on top of a rock with a heavy stone to keep it in place, a big avalanche gaily whisked it away before our eyes, as we descended that afternoon...”<sup>65</sup> Rather than enter her village sans skirt, Le Blond instructed a friend to retrieve an acceptable skirt. Unfortunately, the friend returned with Le Blond's “best evening dress,” which embarrassed her terribly.<sup>66</sup> The gendered dress codes of Victorian society impacted Le Blond so intensely that she chose to return from her mountaineering adventures, sporting the inconvenient but proper attire necessary to be considered a lady.

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<sup>64</sup> Dent, *Mountaineering*, 51.

<sup>65</sup> Elizabeth Le Blond, “Then and Now” (*Ladies Alpine Yearbook*, 1932), 6.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

In the 1880s, women rejected Victorian dress even further. The Rational Dress Society began in London in 1881, where it boldly proclaimed its rejection of clothing that prevented body movement and negatively impacted women's health. A major catalyst for the “Rational Dress Movement” was the increased number of women engaged in physical activities, namely, cycling. A few female climbers were also influential in the Rational Dress Movement. One woman named Ms. Nowell emphatically implored in a journal article that “dress has done all the mischief. For years, it had kept us away from the glory of the woods and the mountain heights. It is time we should reform.”<sup>67</sup> Women saw Victorian dress standards as a hindrance to their alpine pursuits.

Perhaps the most recognizable advocate for rational climbing attire was Annie Smith Peck, the self-proclaimed “Queen of the Climbers.” In 1895, Peck posed for an official portrait wearing her self-made climbing pants.<sup>68</sup> Her portrait was plastered on all her lecture placards and became the most well-known image of Peck. As far as sources show, the only other female climber who wore pants during this time was Meta Brevoort, making Peck's public statement very avant-garde.<sup>69</sup> A *New York Times* story used Peck's attire to argue against the constrictive labels of femininity and masculinity. The article stated that sewing, a “feminine” pursuit, was used by Peck when she “sewed herself some garments and climbed a big mountain,” clearly creating a humorous juxtaposition between the feminine pursuit of sewing and the masculine endeavor of alpinism.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Rebecca A. Brown, *Women on High* (Boston: Appalachian Mountain Club, 2002), 32.

<sup>68</sup> Hannah Kimberley, *A Woman's Place Is at the Top* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2017), 112.

<sup>69</sup> Clare Roche, “Women Climbers 1850–1900: A Challenge to Male Hegemony?,” *Sport in History* 33, no. 3 (September 2013): 236–59, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17460263.2013.826437>.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

## Votes for Women

Another way that some pioneering female mountaineers rejected traditional gender-role conventions was by involving themselves with the women's movement. Although not every female mountaineer chose to connect herself to the issue of women's rights, every woman engaged in mountaineering showed athleticism and a form of independence, characteristics that were countercultural for Victorian society, which primarily expected women to be modest and dependent. Some female climbers were outspoken advocates for women's rights, and some simply climbed. There was no monolithic culture that defined female mountaineers. However, in many ways, the female liberation movement laid the societal groundwork for a generation of mountaineers.

First, societal ideals about what a good woman should be were undergoing drastic changes. During the mid-nineteenth century, the Cult of True Womanhood declined and was replaced with the idea of a "New Woman" who was "intelligent, educated, emancipated, independent and self-supporting."<sup>71</sup> Physical fitness was often associated with the New Woman, marking an acute change from the "True Womanhood" rhetoric that extolled women to be physically weak.

England was the birthplace of that cultural shift, but the New Woman was found most dramatically in America. Subsequently, American mountaineers tended to be more motivated by female equality than their British counterparts. Two of the most notable American alpinists were Annie Smith Peck and Fanny Bullock Workman.

Contemporaries Peck and Workman competed against each other for the female altitude

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<sup>71</sup> Priyanka Mahajan and Jaideep Randhawa, "Emergence of 'New Woman': A Study of Origin of the Phrase in the West from Historical Perspective," *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 21, no. 3 (2016): PP, <https://doi.org/10.9790/0837-2103010104>.

record. Many similarities exist between the two women. Each was part of a new class of “openly feminist mountaineers of genuine renown.”<sup>72</sup> Each was an educated woman who used their mountaineering acclaim to further progress for women's rights. Each unfurled a “Votes for Women” banner on different, impressive mountain ascents. Peck planted her flag on the summit of the Peruvian mountain, Coropuna, as a presumable “last hurrah” in her altitude contest with a man named Hiram Bingham. Peck and Bingham had been racing to the peak of Coropuna, so when Bingham saw a flag bearing the inscription “Joan of Arc Equal Suffrage League—Votes for Women.” he knew that Peck had beaten him to the top.<sup>73</sup>

Annie Smith Peck, in particular, was already engaged in many countercultural activities well before she found her passion for mountaineering. During a time when most academic institutions barred women, Peck fought for her education and earned both a Bachelor's and master's degree from the University of Michigan. Notably, a widely accepted pseudo-scientific article published in 1873 titled *Sex in Education or A Fair Chance for the Girls* argued against female education because, of course, “American women who participated in coeducation were committing a 'slow suicide' by using energy on the brain, which took away energy from the reproductive system.”<sup>74</sup> Annie also rebuked the institution of marriage and adamantly declared from a young age that she would never marry or have children. Considering Peck's untraditional beliefs, adding mountaineering, a dangerous and misunderstood sport, seemed par for her course.

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<sup>72</sup> Mazel, *Mountaineering Women*, 8.

<sup>73</sup> Kimberley, *A Woman's Place Is at the Top*, 266.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

Annie Smith Peck became an advocate for women early in her life after being influenced by writings from suffragettes such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Subsequently, Peck's attitudes about gender equality heavily influenced her climbing career. In her memoirs, Peck wrote that she desired to “do a little genuine exploration, to conquer a virgin peak, to attain some height where *no man* had previously stood.”<sup>75</sup> Competitive in spirit, Peck had multifaceted motivations to climb: to gain notoriety, to elevate the status of women, to embark on adventures in the mountains, and to compete against any gender. In both motivation and achievement, Peck recognized that her status as an elite female mountaineer could help elevate the status of women. She wrote, “I felt that any great achievement in any line of endeavor would be of advantage to my sex.”<sup>76</sup> Some saw female excellence in spheres outside the ones allowed by Victorian society as a problem, but Peck saw it as an opportunity to change how the world viewed women.

While no other mountaineers were as overtly connected to the suffrage movement as Annie Smith Peck, the women who left records wrote of how ideas about gender influenced their climbing. Mary Mummery, for one, wryly joked that her male climbing partner “holds many strange opinions; he believes in ghosts, he also believes that women can climb.”<sup>77</sup> By placing phantasmagoric creatures at the same level of ridiculousness as the notion that women can climb, Mummery creates a poignant commentary on how men

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>76</sup> Annie Smith Peck, “Of Advantage to My Sex,” in *Mountaineering Women*, ed. David Mazel (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1994), 105.

<sup>77</sup> Mary Mummery, “Suitable to the Weaker Sex,” in *Mountaineering Women*, ed. David Mazel (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1994), 61.

typically viewed female mountaineers. In another humorous excerpt, Mummery expresses her displeasure about how “masculine minds” view mountaineering women.

“The masculine mind, however, is with rare exceptions, imbued with the idea that a woman is not a fit comrade for steep ice or precipitous rock, and in consequence, holds it as an article of faith that her climbing should be done by Mark Twain's method, and that she should be satisfied with watching through a telescope some weedy and invertebrate masher being hauled up a steep peak by a couple of burly guides, or by listening to this same masher when, on his return, he lisps out with a sickening drawl the many perils he has encountered.”<sup>78</sup>

Critical commentary about men was relatively rare during Mummery's period, so her words can be taken as a repudiation of the prescribed gender roles of her time. Others, like Lucy Walker, left records, announcing that her goal in writing the book was the “hope of inducing others, 'especially members of my own sex,' to follow in her footsteps.”<sup>79</sup> Walker's desire to share her experience as a way to inspire other women shows a recognition of the way that climbing can empower women.

### **Women in Media**

As women engaged in mountaineering, they encountered gender-based roadblocks. Yet, they climbed. Women formed their climbing clubs, modified their clothing, creatively funded their adventures, and embraced “New Woman” ideals that normalized athletic and independent women. Despite the societal transformation from the Victorian ideal of a modest and controlled woman to the embrace of the “New Woman”

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>79</sup> Michael S. Reidy, “Mountaineering, Masculinity, and the Male Body in Mid-Victorian Britain,” *Osiris* 30, no. 1 (January 2015): 158–81, <https://doi.org/10.1086/682975>.

archetype, characterized as athletic and semi-independent, women still encountered obstacles within the media realm.

It took several decades of climbing before women could engage in the public forum via newspaper. First, the Alpine Club—the world's first mountaineering club—prevented women from joining its ranks or publishing their feats in the *Alpine Journal*. Women were denied membership because they were “not considered to have the physical or moral stamina required for climbing mountains.”<sup>80</sup> The Alpine Club was the largest network of support for mountaineers, making it difficult for women to join expeditions, find funding, or tell their stories. Meta Brevoort, an impressive early mountaineer and the second woman to climb the Alps, is one of the only women to publish her writings in the *Alpine Journal* during their “male-only” publishing policy. She cleverly disguised her gender and presented her adventures under the name of her sickly nephew, William A.B. Coolidge. Another woman published under her husband's name and is still known to history as “Mrs. Henry Warwick Cole.”<sup>81</sup> With the narrative controlled mainly by men, women had to work harder to have their accomplishments recognized.

Further, most mountaineering literature was geared toward a male audience. In Benson's writing, women are only personally addressed regarding their clothing and “moderate helpless[ness]” tying knots.<sup>82</sup> The rest of the writing in his section titled *Mountaineering for Ladies* is directed towards men and how they should manage having a woman on an expedition. Similarly, *The Punch* published a few verses acknowledging

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<sup>80</sup> Andrew Beattie, *The Alps: A Cultural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 210, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/byu/reader.action?docID=5745670#>.

<sup>81</sup> Mrs. Henry Warwick Cole, “A Lady’s Tour Round Monte Rosa,” in *Mountaineering Women*, ed. David Mazel (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1994), 29.

<sup>82</sup> Benson, *British Mountaineering*, 184.

Lucy Walker's first female ascent of the Matterhorn. It stated, "Give three times three cheers for intrepid Miss Walker. / I say, my boys, doesn't she know how to climb." suggesting that while the writers recognized Walker's accomplishment, they were still cognizant of directing their remarks toward male listeners, or, "my boys."<sup>83</sup> When writing about men's attitudes, famed climber Elizabeth Le Blond stated in a 1907 interview that "Many men...are not enthusiastic about women climbers at all; and, perhaps, would rather be without us."<sup>84</sup> These male attitudes are showcased in the commentary made when female climbers excelled.

Often, the achievements of women were devalued on account of their gender. For example, after Miriam O'Brien Underhill completed the first ascent of the Grépon, an 11,424-foot peak in the Mont Blanc Massif range, the famous alpinist Étienne Bruhl remarked, "The Grépon has disappeared. Now that it has been done by two women alone, no self-respecting man can undertake it."<sup>85</sup> Men viewed alpinism as a masculine endeavor, so having women compete alongside them took away from their accomplishments. In Bruhl's words, what "self-respecting man" would brag about any ascent that two women had also completed? Mountains became a preferred site for the cultivation of all that was considered masculine and the expulsion of all that was deemed "effete and effeminate."<sup>86</sup> Albert F. Mummery, an active mountaineer and husband of Mary Mummery, put this attitude into stark terms: "All mountains appear doomed to pass

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<sup>83</sup> Mazel, *Mountaineering Women*, 7.

<sup>84</sup> The Daily Telegraph & Courier | 23 June 1907 accessed through the British Newspaper Archive.

<sup>85</sup> Underhill, *Give Me the Hills*, 127.

<sup>86</sup> Reidy, "Mountaineering, Masculinity, and the Male Body in Mid-Victorian Britain," 172.



through three stages: An inaccessible peak, the hardest climb in the Alps, an easy day for a lady.”<sup>87</sup> When women followed in the footsteps of male mountaineers, men were quick to disregard their achievements based on sex.

Further, women were criticized for the notoriety they gained through their climbing endeavors. Mountaineering is a somewhat decentralized, so access is not as easily denied. While cultural influences certainly act as obstacles, very little can be done to stop determined women from climbing. In a 1911 article titled 'The Ascent of Women,' it was agreed that “There is no sphere of sport...in which women have more distinguished themselves than in mountaineering. Woman, in fact, seems to have an aptitude for climbing.”<sup>88</sup> In the same article, an image was published depicting the “Top Fifteen Women Climbers,” such as Fanny Bullock Workman, Annie Smith Peck, and others, pictured

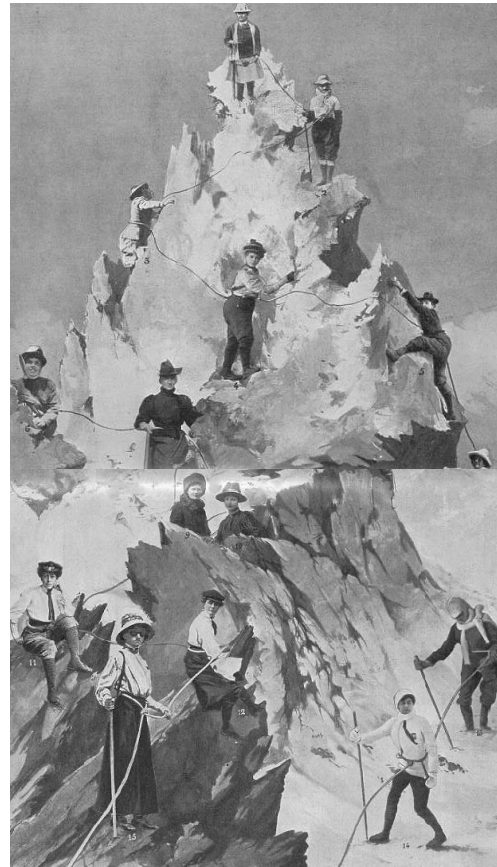


Figure 2

above.<sup>89</sup> Due to the modest notoriety women gained from mountaineering, they were subjected to various ridiculous claims regarding their desire to climb.

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<sup>87</sup> Birkett and Peascod, *Women Climbing*, 18.

<sup>88</sup> The Sketch, “The Ascent of Women,” *The Sketch*, September 6, 1911, British Newspaper Archive, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/titles/the-sketch>.

<sup>89</sup> The Sketch, “Top Fifteen Women Climbers,” *The Sketch*, September 6, 1911, British Newspaper Archive, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/titles/the-sketch>.

In the late 1970s and 80s, mainstream media caught hold of the previously niche sport of rock climbing. For elite rock climbers, this attention was lucrative. TV interviews, product sponsorships, book deals, and magazine spots became a financial means to a professional end: full-time rock climbing. Prior to this point, “climber” and “dirtbag” were lovingly synonymous, and the elite subsisted on as little as seventy-five dollars a summer, quite literally eating dog food and collecting cans.<sup>90</sup> Media interest irrevocably changed climbing culture by allowing climbers the financial security needed to propel their climbing to the next level. History has shown, however, that media interest is skewed heavily towards male climbers, adding a barrier of increased financial security to female athletes trying to make a living in the climbing world.

Although women were not often the subject of advertisements as athletes, the pages of *Climbing Magazine* are decorated with advertisements where beautiful women fondle pieces of climbing gear. In one, delicate female legs are adorned with neoprene socks.<sup>91</sup> In another, a half-nude woman suggestively peeks out from a sleeping bag.<sup>92</sup> In a hand-drawn comic advertising climbing chalk, a crudely drawn woman whose breasts are fully exposed asks a man who is putting climbing chalk on his genitals, “Do you have to use chalk for everything?”<sup>93</sup> Yet another shows a cartoon man and a woman conversing in a car. The woman listed her climbing accomplishments, stating she was “in Hueca last winter with Nancy Feagin and all the girls.”<sup>94</sup> For context, Feagin was one of the best

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<sup>90</sup> *Valley Uprising* (Netflix, 2014).

<sup>91</sup> *Climbing Magazine*, June/July 1982, 16.

<sup>92</sup> *Climbing Magazine*, March/April 1974, 15.

<sup>93</sup> *Climbing Magazine*, January/February 1982, 41.

<sup>94</sup> *Climbing Magazine*, June/July 1992, 13.

female climbers in the 1990s and a frequent climbing partner of Lynn Hill. In response to the cartoon woman's words, the man is shown with a thought bubble above his head, stating, “She's killing me!” These advertisements suggest that women were valued for their looks and their bodies rather than their contributions to the sport of rock climbing.



Figure 3

A 1988 study conducted by Mary Jo Kane, a pioneer in researching women in sports, found that female athletes are more likely to be represented in popular media when they are engaged in “sex-appropriate sports such as gymnastics, tennis, and golf or “sex-inappropriate sports,” such as basketball, weightlifting or wrestling.”<sup>95</sup> Rock climbing, a dangerous endeavor that relies on intense musculature, could most certainly be categorized as a sex-inappropriate sport. Another study found that in 1989, women’s coverage hovered around 5%, spiked in 1999 to 9%, and then “declined to near lows of 2–3% in the latest iterations of the study.”<sup>96</sup> Even with the advent of Title IX increasing opportunities for young female athletes, media coverage of female athletes overall did not bear any statistically significant increase.

<sup>95</sup> Mary Jo Kane, “Media Coverage of the Female Athlete Before, During, and after Title IX: Sports Illustrated Revisited,” *Journal of Sport Management* 2, no. 2 (July 1988): 87–99, <https://doi.org/10.1123/jsm.2.2.87>.

<sup>96</sup> Cheryl Cooky, “Gender, Sport and Media between the Mid-1980s and Early 2000s: Developments, Trajectories and Transformations,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Feminism and Sport, Leisure and Physical Education*, ed. Beccy Watson et al. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 133–47, [https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-53318-0\\_9](https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-53318-0_9).

Historian Rachel Da Silva's work illustrates the lack of representation within the climbing community as well. Although the National Sporting Goods Association 1990 census revealed that nearly forty percent of all climbers were female, "less than a dozen articles a year by or about women" were published by the six nationally distributed climbing magazines in that same year.<sup>97</sup> This stark contrast between the actual participation of women climbers and their limited visibility in climbing publications highlights a significant gender-based imbalance in the climbing community.

While media coverage centered around male performance in sports in 1989, Lynn Hill steadily emerged as the most accomplished and well-known female climber. The climbing community has overwhelmingly acknowledged Hill as one of the best climbers in the world, without regard to her gender. Joseph E. Taylor III calls Lynn "the first woman to ascend El Cap as an equal."<sup>98</sup> As noted by John Long, an accomplished Yosemite Stonemaster who wrote the introduction for her autobiography, "We normally would have growled like wolves at having our male luster dimmed by a woman. But Lynn shattered the gender barrier [and] the bone-deep chauvinism most of us had unconsciously embraced soon melted away."<sup>99</sup> Studying how Hill was portrayed by popular media and climbing media allows one to see how media treatment differed between genders, even when faced with the best woman in the world.

To explore how gender influences the media portrayal of rock climbers, we can turn to a source that examines the experiences of female climbers in the context of media

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<sup>97</sup> Da Silva, *Leading Out*, xvii.

<sup>98</sup> Taylor III, *Pilgrims of the Vertical*, 144.

<sup>99</sup> Stonemasters refers to a small group of elite climbers who dominated Yosemite from 1973-1980; Hill and Child, *Climbing Free*, 7.

representation. In Climbing Magazine's 1987 "Profile of Lynn Hill" by John Steiger, over half of the interview questions concern gender. Initially, Steiger, a casual climber, "warns" Hill of difficult routes in their climbing area and suggests climbing routes well below her typical grade. As she climbed, he wrote, "I was amazed, never had I seen a woman climb so well." Steiger asks Hill a series of questions and statements posed as questions: "Why should women deserve any more recognition than they get?" and "Women are certainly at a disadvantage culturally...they aren't taught things like aggressiveness or self-confidence." Hill comments that to achieve gender equality in climbing, women need more media representation equity, to which the interviewer responds, "...that just isn't practical. When you report on the ten best climbers, and only one is a woman, 'women' will not receive equal space." After spending several days with Lynn Hill, Steiger is still on a quest to find out what makes her so good, so he interviews a man who knows Hill.<sup>100</sup>

World-famous climber Jean Baptiste-Tribout infamously stated that "no woman would ever climb 5.14a."<sup>101</sup> When Climbing Magazine did a profile on Tribout in 1992, the questions he was asked differed from Lynn Hill's profile. Tribout was asked about strength and endurance, specific routes he has climbed, his present climbing objectives, and what the future of climbing would be. In comparing the interviews of Lynn Hill and Jean Baptiste-Tribout, it becomes evident that gender plays a pivotal role in shaping the media portrayal of rock climbers. While Hill's interview was heavily centered on

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<sup>100</sup> John Steiger, "Profile of Lynn Hill," *Climbing*, 1987.

<sup>101</sup> Andrew Bisharat, "American Woman Reaches a New Milestone in Rock Climbing," *National Geographic*, March 1, 2017, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/adventure/article/american-woman-reaches-a-new-milestone-in-rock-climbing#>.

questions related to her gender, Tribout's interview, despite their equal climbing prowess, revolved around his achievements and the sport itself.

The path of female climbers has been marked by their determination to overcome gender-based obstacles. Despite their notable achievements, media representation has often perpetuated gender biases. Female climbers were frequently objectified and received limited coverage, reflecting a persistent gender bias in climbing media. This historical perspective underscores the enduring challenge of achieving equitable recognition in media coverage, highlighting the importance of assessing climbers based on their accomplishments rather than traditional gender roles.

### **Misrepresentations of Women and Their Motivations**

When George Mallory, an early English mountaineer, was asked why he climbed Everest, he succinctly responded, “Because it’s there.”<sup>102</sup> The amount of mountaineering literature dedicated to answering the question, “Why climb?” demonstrates the perpetual fascination with the motivations of mountaineers. For women, answers as simple as Mallory’s were not sufficient. Instead, motivation has been assigned to female mountaineers by various historians and reporters.

One such historian suggested that the unmarried Henriette d’Angeville “loved Mont Blanc because she had nothing else to love” and climbed because she had a “morbid passion for self-advertisement.”<sup>103</sup> Perhaps this perception of D’Angeville came because she was the first woman to climb Mont Blanc of her strength—one of the Alps’

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<sup>102</sup> The New York Times, “Climbing Mount Everest Is Work for Supermen,” *The New York Times*, March 18, 1923.

<sup>103</sup> Mazel, *Mountaineering Women*, 5.

most notable peaks. Indeed, some modicum of notoriety would come to a woman who ascended such a fearsome peak. Or perhaps the criticism was founded in accounts of D'Angeville's dramatic flair because she wore a feather boa while climbing Mont Blanc and emphatically cried, "If I die before reaching the summit, promise me you'll carry my body to the top and leave it there!"<sup>104</sup>

Whatever the reason for this analysis, D'Angeville's account of her ascent of Mont Blanc paints a different story. For D'Angeville, climbing mountains created happy memories for her to draw upon. In her own words, she stated, "It was not the puny fame of being the first woman to venture on such a journey that filled me with exhilaration...rather, it was the awareness of the spiritual well-being that would follow. This one memory would counterbalance many others less welcome."<sup>105</sup> Further, after successfully ascending, D'Angeville threw a celebratory dinner, not for herself, but for Maria Paradis, the first woman to climb Mont Blanc.<sup>106</sup> Rather than glory in her achievement, she honored the woman before her. Historian David Mazel also argued on behalf of Henriette d'Angeville, stating that she was not obsessed with self-advertisement but was, instead, a "genuine alpinist" who had a pure passion for mountains.

Another scholar wrote that many believed female mountaineers shared characteristics with their male counterparts, although only negative characteristics are

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<sup>104</sup> Brown, *Women on High*, 14.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>106</sup> Henriette D'Angeville is considered the first woman to climb Mont Blanc solely with her efforts. D'Angeville did not allow any of the guides to carry her, although they offered. Maria Paradis was the first woman to make it to the peak of Mont Blanc, but guides carried her for much of the ascent. Additionally, D'Angeville was a career climber, while Maria Paradis ascended Mont Blanc partially because she thought the attention would bring more business to her small tea shop.

mentioned, calling the women “competitive, self-aggrandizing...and self-promoting.”<sup>107</sup>

Annie Smith Peck once received a letter about her climbing that boldly stated, “If you are determined to commit suicide, why not come home and do so in a quiet, lady-like manner?”<sup>108</sup> In Steve Roper's history of climbing in Yosemite titled *Camp 4*, women are only mentioned as “wives and girlfriends” who “tried climbing of course, but...usually did it because their men were doing it—not for any particular love of the sport.”<sup>109</sup> In these examples, the motivations of female climbers are characterized as either self-promotion, suicidal tendencies, or romantic relationships with male climbers—all of which overlook their genuine commitment to their sport.

In 1975, when the first all-female group climbed Mt. Everest, a Japanese media outlet categorized the ascent as a “selfish hobby” that took the women away from their husbands and children. One of the women on that ascent remarked, “Scaling Mount Everest was easy compared to overcoming discrimination in Japan.”<sup>110</sup> For women, the mountain is sometimes only half the battle, with the struggle against discrimination equally daunting. One woman on the Everest ascent, Junko Tabei, continued climbing until the age of seventy-seven. A year before her death, an interviewer asked Tabei, “Why climb?” to which she responded with simplicity: “It is because I love the

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<sup>107</sup> Reidy, “Mountaineering, Masculinity, and the Male Body in Mid-Victorian Britain,” 165.

<sup>108</sup> Kimberley, *A Woman's Place Is at the Top*, 89.

<sup>109</sup> Steve Roper, *Camp 4: Recollections of a Yosemite Rock Climber* (Seattle: Mountaineers, 1994).

<sup>110</sup> Da Silva, *Leading Out*, xiii.



mountains.”<sup>111</sup> Even as Tabei battled peritoneal cancer, she climbed mountains, showcasing her love of mountaineering.

It is not uncommon for accomplished women to have their marital status criticized, their identity reduced to their relationship status, or their ambition labeled as egotistical or selfish. There is a marked difference in the response to the question, “Why climb?” when the answer comes from the female mountaineer herself. An Australian mountaineer, Freda de Faur, wrote that she “truly believe[s] that the true mountaineer, like the poet, is born, not made. The details of their craft both, of course, must learn, but the overmastering love of the mountains is something which wells up from within and will not be denied.”<sup>112</sup> De Faur’s romantic notion of the mountains does not match the “egotistical” description assigned to her gender. Perhaps alpinism is a selfish endeavor; in the same way, pursuing happiness could be considered self-serving.

Female alpinists fled to nature. Elizabeth Le Blond, the first President of the Ladies Alpine Club, said that she “owe[d] a supreme debt of gratitude to the mountains for knocking from me the shackles of conventionality.”<sup>113</sup> Le Blond argued that women should be taken to the mountains to see what it can do for their health and spirit. Her argument is fitting, seeing as she found climbing after being sent to a Swiss health resort in hopes that the fresh air would strengthen her frail body. Or consider the account of a British mountaineer who wrote this of the mountains she ascended: “I climbed like a

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<sup>111</sup> Brad Frenette, “A Final Interview with the First Woman to Summit Everest,” *Outside Magazine*, October 20, 2017, <https://www.outsideonline.com/outdoor-adventure/climbing/junko-tabei-anniversary/>.

<sup>112</sup> Freda De Faur, “I Would Lose My Reputation,” in *Mountaineering Women*, ed. David Mazel (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1994), 81.

<sup>113</sup> Mazel, *Mountaineering Women*, 3.

child, ardently, engrossingly...unaware that [onlookers] even existed.”<sup>114</sup> During the latter half of the twentieth century, Sallie Greenwood, a researcher for the National Geographic Society, wrote that her findings on female climbing had a strong theme: “Women enjoy climbing for the same reasons men do: they like it.”<sup>115</sup> Finally, historians Bill Peascod and Bill Birkett wrote, “Let us not imagine that women...chose to climb for any other reason other than because they wanted to—the strongest possible reason of all.”<sup>116</sup> Clearly, many women have an acute affinity for the beauty of the mountains and have perhaps been unfairly assigned inferior motivations, such as selfishness and self-aggrandizement.

### **“A Glorious Day for Womanhood” Indeed**

Much can be learned from the experiences of the female pioneers who climbed into a society that would have rather stayed home. Their barriers and successes illustrate much more significant ideas about gender conventions throughout one hundred and fifty years. An understanding of the ways that these women fought against gender conventions can give us an understanding of the progress they made for women in every sphere of influence. In some cases, ideas like female dependence and the “weaker sex” ideology that the early female mountaineers of the 1850s faced similarities to the sexism faced by female climbers today. When women succeeded in alpinism, they showed the world that women are independent, athletic, and strong-willed. Ascents made by female climbers

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<sup>114</sup> Sallie Greenwood, “A Frame of Reference: Historical Perspective,” *Climbing*, 1987.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Birkett and Peascod, *Women Climbing*, 13.

impacted the societal standing of women. When Henriette D'Angeville returned from her ascent of Mont Blanc, a small girl came up to her in celebration. She did not say, “What a glorious day for Henriette!” or, “What a glorious day for female climbers!” but rather, “What a glorious day for womanhood!”<sup>117</sup> As women continue to pioneer in every realm, one hopes that more “glorious day[s] for womanhood” are ahead.

Female climbers and mountaineers have largely ignored societal limitations and perceived gender-barriers. Their history can be summed up with this sentiment—they climbed anyway. One conclusion that can be made as a result of this work is that female athletes deserve equal levels of respect and consideration, especially given their levels of athleticism and accomplishment within the realm of mountaineering and climbing.

Future historians should not solely rely on early historiographies to tell the full story of mountaineering and climbing. Although women have always been an integral piece of the history of mountaineering and climbing, they are rarely mentioned by nineteenth and twentieth-century historians. Further historical work is needed to integrate the primary sources left behind by these mountaineering women into the general scholarship of these sports. Additional research is needed to discuss the implications of these findings for women’s sports. Although rock climbing and mountaineering differ significantly from mainstream sports, namely in the lack of organizational structure and physiological requirements, there are relevant connections to be made about the gendered coverage of female climbers and female athletes in general.

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<sup>117</sup> Brown, *Women on High*, 29.

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