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Delightful Escapes: U. S. Female Mountaineers Travel Abroad, 1890-1915

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### **Delightful Escapes: U. S. Female Mountaineers Travel Abroad, 1890-1915**

I would like to start this afternoon by sharing two primary documents with you. The first is an editorial note describing a “Mrs. Workman.” The second is a letter sent to a Miss Annie S. Peck. Though many of us today know little, if anything, about either of these women, the following two documents reveal an impressive contemporaneous familiarity with both Mrs. Workman (more commonly known as Fanny Bullock Workman) and Annie S. Peck. On June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1910 the editor of the well-circulated British newspaper *The Independent* described Bullock Workman thus:

Mrs. Workman, who is a native of Worcester, Mass., is an Officer l’Instruction Publique of France and a fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, London. Major Darwin, the president of the society, said after Mrs. Workman read her paper on the Hispar Journey before it last December: ‘I believe I am right in saying that the feats accomplished by Mrs. Workman are more remarkable in the way of mountaineering than those which have been accomplished ever before by any of her sex. Whether I ought to make that limitation or not I am rather doubtful, but, at all events, with that limitation it will not be denied.’<sup>1</sup>

Approximately fourteen years prior a young fourteen-year-old boy from Grand Rapids, Michigan wrote to Peck (who had recently summited the Matterhorn) with the hopes of gaining her signature. His letter read:

Dear Madam,  
... I collect autographs. I have Grover Cleveland[sic] and Sol Smith Russels [sic] and Wm. [i.e. William] McKinleys [sic]. It will be a great kindness if you will send me yours. Please, send me yours.  
Yours Truly,  
Charles W. Slack<sup>2</sup>

Given these two glimpses into the past one cannot help but notice numerous overarching trends in their tones and implications. First, both documents treat Workman and Peck with respect as prominent public figures. In the editor’s note, the president of the Royal Geographical Society

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<sup>1</sup> Fanny Bullock Workman, “Recent First Ascents in the Himalaya,” Editor’s Note, *The Independent* (June 2, 1910): 1202.

<sup>2</sup> Charles W. Slack to Annie S. Peck, 13 July 1896, Peck Papers, Brooklyn College Special Collections, Brooklyn College Library, Brooklyn.

names Bullock Workman the most accomplished female mountaineer of her time (even going so far as to question whether such a statement fully complements her climbing career). In the second document a young teenage boy equates Peck's signature to the signatures of two U.S. Presidents—Grover Cleveland and William McKinley—as well as that of the popular late nineteenth and early-twentieth-century actor Sol Smith Russell. Given such an impressive list of public figures one can only imagine Peck's feelings as she read such a letter!

Furthermore, both sources emphasize the gender of their subjects. Most explicit in this case being, of course, the editor's note in which Bullock Workman's womanhood figures dominant in Major Darwin's description of her climbing career. Notice that while Darwin feels uncomfortable with the supposed "limitation" he imposes upon Bullock Workman by comparing her solely to other women mountaineers, he does not find the bravado to also situate her achievements among those of male climbers. Though careful to mention that "[w]hether [he] ought to make that limitation or not [he] [is] rather doubtful," Darwin still seems incapable of separating Bullock Workman from her gender. Her womanhood evidently carries an impressive cultural weight; one which is perceived to manifest itself to such a powerful degree in all aspects of her life that it becomes a necessarily explicit boundary to his consideration of her accomplishments.

Though implicit, one also finds a gender implication in Charles Slack's brief letter. Put simply, Peck figures as the only woman mentioned alongside three prominent men. Though unspoken, Peck's unique position in Charles' list thus serves to further a common stereotype of Victorian lady mountaineers—they were quite singular among Victorian women and spectacular in their adventures. Though women such as Bullock Workman and Peck were not the norm in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century America, tokenizing them and focusing too much on their gender seems to miss another significant point demonstrated by this letter. The gender disparity so poignantly obvious to us does not seem to be of great consequence to Charles. Unlike Darwin,

Charles makes no explicit reference to Peck's femininity. Her signature, and by abstraction, Peck herself are in no way separated from the men mentioned. What matters to this young fourteen-year-old boy is beyond gender; it is about fame, respect, and the ability to relate to the individuals of his admiration through a tangible object—a signature.

I think we can learn something here. Although, as Darwin's description of Bullock Workman demonstrates, gender certainly permeated the lives of these women, a continuous scholarly focus solely on their gender leaves ignored and hidden the complexity of their lives. Today therefore I would like to emulate Charles. I will focus not primarily on Bullock Workman and Peck's gender, but on their fame; or more specifically, their path towards fame as international climbers. I will contend that their nationality and socio-economic backgrounds intertwined in a complex fashion with cultural ideals of gender to ultimately facilitate their fame as Victorian mountaineers.

By the late 1800s many elite U.S. men and women found healthful exercise, mental reinvigoration, and camaraderie within the country's rapidly growing mountaineering community. Following this trend, Bullock Workman and Peck first experienced mountaineering not abroad, but at home in New Hampshire's White Mountains. During the second-half of the 1800s Peck ventured to the range as a young child with her father and Bullock Workman as a newly married woman. Though the White Mountains are quite conservative in height compared to the ranges of their later adventures in the Andes and Himalayas respectively, with their peaks reaching an average of only 4,000 feet, these excursions allowed Peck and Bullock Workman to experience firsthand the rewarding exertion of climbing not only alongside the men in their lives but also within proximity of other women.

For, unlike the prominent clubs of Europe, American clubs maintained a respectable female membership either after a few years of existence or, in numerous cases, from their inception.<sup>3</sup> The first of these clubs, The Appalachian Mountain Club (AMC) founded in 1876, served as a model for future U.S. mountaineering clubs in this regard. Developed “during a time of tremendous public interest in leaving the cities and enjoying the fresh air and sublime landscape of the mountains,” the AMC boasted an impressive female membership from its inception. Stemming from a growing public discourse concerning the “proper” roles of women and a newly emerging ideal of the feminine as both domestic and athletic, the AMC opened itself to female membership and the ideal that mountaineering was “one of the new things under the sun” which women should be permitted to enjoy. Or, as AMC member Moses Sweetser once put it, “In these days of advocacy of female suffrage and woman’s rights it need hardly to be stated that American ladies can accomplish nearly everything which is possible to their sturdier brethren.”<sup>4</sup>

Consequently, although men held the majority of leadership positions, club women “organized and hosted outings, lectured at club meets, contributed to papers on botany, geology, and natural history, and led subgroups “ of the AMC.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, by its second decade, AMC hiking excursions saw women outnumbering men on the trails. “In July 1886,” for example, “it was reported that on Mount Washington ‘about two-thirds of the [approximately one hundred] members present were ladies, and they showed equal endurance and enthusiasm on the walks with men.’”<sup>6</sup> Indeed this female presence was felt to such a great degree that climbers outside of the nation’s borders acknowledged it. For instance, Emily A. Thackary, an English woman, recognized the

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<sup>3</sup> Rebecca A. Brown, *Women on High: Pioneers of Mountaineering* (Guilford, CT: The Globe Pequot Press, Inc., 2002), 6.

<sup>4</sup> Moses F. Sweetser, *The White Mountains, A Handbook for Travellers* (Boston: James Osgood, 1881), 35. (One can find this source also cited in Brown, *Women on High*, 121.)

<sup>5</sup> Brown, *Women on High*, 122.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 122-123.

unique position of women within the AMC and its implicit challenge to traditional British notions of gender in the August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1889 publication of the *White Mountain Echo*. She noted,

In the conservative masculine mind, particularly in Europe, it has been a mooted point whether a woman could climb, camp out and ‘rough it,’ with any pleasure to herself or comfort to the ‘lords of creation.’ But to-day in America, things are greatly changed; mountain-tramping has become a ‘fad’ among ladies and they are greatly encouraged by their brothers, their cousins and their uncles.<sup>7</sup>

Thus we discover an avenue through which Bullock Workman and Peck’s socio-economic backgrounds and nationality impacted their eventual mountaineering careers. Firstly, born into affluent and well-connected New England families, both women were situated financially to experience the exhilarations of mountain climbing. As journalist Rebecca A. Brown elucidates in *Women on High*, “... many of the early English and European mountaineers” benefited from a “background of wealth and privilege.”<sup>8</sup> Climbers of the White Mountains were no different. Undeniably, the AMC catered to and retained a membership of “well-to-do professionals” first from Boston and then from other regions of the Northeastern United States.<sup>9</sup> Relying upon the improved transportation provided by railroads established earlier in the century,<sup>10</sup> AMC members and non-members alike flocked to the White Mountains during the summer looking forward to outdoor adventure and social interaction with people similar to themselves both in race and class. Thus, the place of Bullock Workman and Peck’s first climbing experiences can be seen not as a product of random selection, but as a result of their prosperous New England backgrounds.

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<sup>7</sup> Emily A. Thackray, “The Fair Mountaineers,” *White Mountain Echo* (August 3, 1889).

<sup>8</sup> Brown, *Women on High*, 5.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>10</sup> For a thorough discussion of railroad development in the United States consider reading Marguerite S. Shaffer, *See America First: Tourism and National Identity, 1880-1940* (Washington, D. C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001) and Dorothy Middleton, “Some Victorian Lady Travellers,” *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 139, no. 1 (February 1973), 66.

Bullock Workman serves as a case in point. Given her husband's, William Hunter Workman's, status as an established Massachusetts surgeon, it was conceivably only a matter of time until the energetic couple heard through professional acquaintances of the White Mountains' allure. Being an independently wealthy couple then allowed them to easily act on this knowledge. Unlike many Americans, the Workmans could easily take time away from their daily duties to spend weeks trekking in the White Mountains' forested terrain without fear of its potential monetary consequences, giving Bullock Workman a chance to learn the joys of climbing necessary to motivating her later mountaineering career.

Furthermore, Peck and Bullock Workman's nationality positioned them for initial mountaineering experiences that supported their belief in women's rights. As Thackary's previous observation emphasized, during the turn of the nineteenth-century the United States' climbing community emerged distinctive among those of the Western world due to one significant factor—it openly allowed and even encouraged female involvement. Consequently, unlike the initial experiences of many European female mountaineers, Bullock Workman and Peck witnessed and likely interacted with numerous women during their first excursions in the mountains, thus helping to reinforce what would become for both women a life-long and explicit belief in women's equal abilities to men.

Though no known primary source explicitly makes such a connection, I propose that Bullock Workman and Peck's advocacy of female suffrage and equal opportunity (both in the workplace and academia) during the height of their climbing careers support this point. No other well-known international mountaineers of the time, male or female, spoke as openly and fervently about women's rights. Indeed, Bullock Workman and Peck became recognized as public figures not only through their mountaineering achievements, but also through their ardent feminism. Many American and European newspapers carried stories such as that of Peck wearing a button in support

of female suffrage while climbing in Peru and Bullock Workman holding a newspaper that read “Votes for Women” at the summit of a mountain in the Karakoram range to a wide readership.<sup>11</sup> Though not always received positively, these stories became sources of discussion among climbers, geographical Fellows, and others, solidifying the recognition of Bullock Workman and Peck within numerous social circles. In this way, Bullock Workman and Peck’s American upbringing affected their eventual fame. As members of a nation obsessed with debates of women’s rights and home to the first climbing community open to women, Bullock Workman and Peck gained a gender perspective and familiarity with a discourse concerning women’s rights that became an essential aspect of their public prominence.

I do not wish here to support an argument that Bullock Workman and Peck’s nationality and socio-economic backgrounds determined their lives’ paths more than that of their gender. Rather I hope to demonstrate that, even on a basic level, Victorian lady mountaineers’ socio-economic backgrounds and nationalities played integral roles in these women’s eventual achievements and fame, working alongside and through their gendered identities in significant ways. By concentrating today on one elementary topic—that of Bullock Workman and Peck’s first climbing experiences—I also hope to reveal the danger of focusing solely on these women’s gender. For, once one moves into a mode of historical analysis open to a plurality of lenses, obvious historical factors before left blurred come into vivid relief and remind us that regardless of the complexity of our analyses, if too narrowly defined, our scholarship remains ignorant of the imbricative nature of the past.

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<sup>11</sup> Numerous historical monographs discuss this journalistic coverage including, but definitely not limited to: Brown’s *Women on High* (2002); Elizabeth Fagg Olds, *Women of the Four Winds* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985); Jane Robinson, *Wayward Women: A Guide to Women Travelers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Michelle Slung, *Living with Cannibals and Other Women’s Adventures* (Washington D. C.: Adventure Press, 2000); and Marion Tinling, *Women Into the Unknown: A Sourcebook on Women Explorers and Travelers* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989).