

8

Crystal and Cold Blue Chasms

The Literature of the Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks World Heritage Site

IMAGINE WET PINES. Wood smoke. The yellow of camp firelight under a hide roof in the rain. Wrapped in a buffalo robe, you are listening to stories. It is the history of your people that you are learning. Words and songs, smells and sounds; stories made inseparable in memory between the teller and the places in which each story was told.

What if, like all but two of the Native peoples of North America, you were born into a culture without the written word? What would it be like to be charged with the responsibility of passing ten thousand years of your past from your generation to the next through the spoken word? Would you remember the stories? Would you be able to tell them again?

If this were how you lived would it matter if you suddenly found yourself in the presence of alien others who had the written word? What would it be like if the first written language to which you were exposed wasn't yours? What if these new words re-named your world? What if these new words remade the geography of where you lived? How would you deal with words for which, as with smallpox, you had no experience or immunity; words that without your permission reduced the radius of your once wide world to the solitary boundary of the self? What if the language you were forced to learn obliterated

you? Could you trust words that betrayed you? Could you continue to tell stories that extinguished the fire among the pines, then carried the dripping forest away?

The earliest writings, like the earliest paintings, were created by visiting foreigners for audiences at home. As Native peoples in the West had no written language of their own, early European exploration accounts served to create a new image of the mountain West that largely excluded local presence and pre-contact history. Native people had no way to defend their interpretations of place from the explosive influence of the popular print media of the day. A few words written in a journal by a hasty traveller had more impact than the oral traditions passed down through thousands of years of Native presence in the West.

Most of the very early Europeans who made their way west to the Rockies were fur traders. As trade was their central focus, theirs is largely a language of commerce. We know how many furs were taken here and there, and we can learn distances between features along the rivers. But for the most part the journals of the fur trade are as spare and empty as the lonely miles that separated the traders' posts.

As has already been noted, the most famous of fur trade explorers was David Thompson. Thompson first came to the Bow Valley near Canmore in the autumn of 1800 and spent the next dozen years cultivating Native knowledge of the mountain passes that crossed the Great Divide. The conditions under which Thompson travelled were often deplorable. At the end of a long day's push into unknown mountains, he must have had difficulty summoning the energy to write. That he was the first to write about many of the places he visited imbues his work not only with historical but literary importance.

As dryly and matter-of-factly as Thompson tried to describe it, the West could hardly be contained by his prose. It is January of 1811. Thompson has found his way to the summit of his second great gap in the spine of the Rockies, Athabasca Pass:

strange to say, here is a strong belief that the haunt of the mammoth is about this defile, I questioned several, none could positively say, that they had seen him, but their belief I found firm and not to be shaken. I remarked to them, that such an enormous heavy Animal must leave indelible marks of his feet, and his feeding. This they all acknowledged, and that they had never seen any marks of him, and therefore could show me none. All I could say did not shake their belief in its existence.¹

David Thompson was cautious in his literary creation of the Rockies. Under the sway still of the Church, he is representative of those early

generations of explorers who thought mountains abodes of evil remote from the blessings of God. This same attitude prevailed widely among travellers during the fur trade. Ross Cox reports that a “rough-spun, unsophisticated Canadian” in the party, which included Gabriel Franchère, that crossed the Rockies in 1814 spoke for many who crossed the Rockies early in the nineteenth century. “I’ll take my oath, my dear friends,” he wrote of Athabasca Pass, “that God Almighty never made such a place.”²

ARTICULATE ADVERTISING ATTRACTS LITERATE TOURISTS

THOUGH THERE WAS A GOOD DEAL of technical writing done on the subject of the Canadian Rockies during the railway survey era, a real literature of place didn’t emerge until tourists rode the first trains west. In those heady days before transcontinental train travel became commonplace, surprisingly good writing about the Rockies was even found in advertising. Copywriters in the employ of the Canadian Pacific outdid one another with superlatives describing the scenery surrounding grand new railway hotels.

In 1888, Canadian Pacific published a brochure entitled *The New Highway To The East*, which was a paean to the glories of travelling across Canada as a direct route to the Orient. In it was some highly compelling writing:

Passing three emerald lakes, deep set in the mountains, we follow the west-bound stream down through a tortuous rock-ribbed cañon, where the waters are dashed to foam in incessant leaps and whirls. This is Wapta or Kicking Horse pass. Ten miles below the summit we round the base of Mount Stephen, a stupendous mountain rising directly from the railway to a height of more than eight thousand feet, holding on one of its shoulders, and almost over our heads, a glacier, whose shining green ice, five hundred feet thick, is slowly crowded over a sheer precipice ... and crushed to atoms below.³

The railway created our modern image of western mountains and established a new standard for travel writing. The educated and the literate flocked west. For a time the reality of the Rockies was actually equivalent to image portrayed through advertising. Visitors went home wild-eyed with the glory of Canadian peaks.

Walter Dwight Wilcox was an early tourist-explorer who wrote in an enduring way about the Canadian Rockies. After graduating from Yale University, Wilcox spent his summers in the remote wilds of the

Canada's mountain West. In 1893, he and a few companions spent most of the summer camped on the north shore of Lake Louise.

Wilcox wrote two influential books about the Rockies. His earliest work, *Camping in the Canadian Rockies*, was published in 1896 and went through several editions before appearing in an enlarged format entitled *The Rockies of Canada* in 1900.⁴ In 1909, Wilcox published his *Guide to the Lake Louise District*, a popular and definitive trail aid that quickly went out of print. Consistent with his time, Wilcox tried hard to be scientific in his descriptions:

*The lake is little more than a mile long and about one-fourth of a mile wide. The outline is remarkably like that of a human foot. Forests come down nearly to the water's edge on all sides of the lake, but there is a narrow margin of rough angular stones where the ripples from the lake have washed out the soil and even undermined the trees in some places. The water is a blue-green color, so clear that the stones on the bottom and the old water-logged trunks of trees, long since wrested from the shores by storms and avalanches, may be discerned even in several fathoms of water. The lake is 230 feet deep in the centre, and the bottom slopes down very suddenly from the shores.*⁵

The success of Wilcox's books inspired Canadians to begin to think in a new way about their own mountains. If American tourists could write popular books about the Canadian Alps, then surely Canadians could do the same.

The first successful Canadian mountain writer was Arthur Oliver Wheeler. After years of working with the Dominion Land Survey, Wheeler wrote the definitive work on the history of exploration and mountaineering around Rogers Pass. When *The Selkirk Ranges* was published by the Department of the Interior in 1905, it was immediately recognized as Canada's first homegrown mountain classic. As already noted, it was in the following year that Wheeler co-founded the Alpine Club of Canada. Though the club's principal aim was to get Canadians climbing, it also encouraged Canadians to contribute to the *Canadian Alpine Journal*, Canada's first and longest-running mountaineering periodical. The first issue of the CAJ was published in 1907. Mountain writing in Canada hasn't looked back since.

WRITER-MOUNTAINEERS

THE SECOND MAJOR WORK of 1905, *In The Heart of the Canadian Rockies*,⁶ was written by a British vicar who had visited Canada over the course of several summers while convalescing from "mental fatigue." While



THE PEAK OF AUTUMN

Visitors often express a sense of experiencing an underlying current at Mount Assiniboine that somehow connects the landscape to the fundamental universal rhythms that unify form and meaning in art, poetry and music.

Photograph by R.W. Sandford.

the state of James Outram's mental health may have at some time been tenuous, there was no doubt about his mountaineering abilities.

Outram first visited the Rockies with his brother in 1900. As has already been indicated, in 1901 he became the first to climb Mount Assiniboine. In 1902, he returned again to make the first ascent of Mount Columbia, then as now one of the most remote peaks in the Rockies. Later in the summer, he and guide Christian Kaufman made the first perilous ascent of Mount Bryce, far and away the most dangerous climb undertaken in the early period of mountaineering in the Rockies.

This book is best accompanied by *Climbs and Explorations in the Canadian Rockies* by Hugh Stutfield and Norman Collie.⁷ Collie discovered the Columbia Icefield in 1898 and competed fiercely with Outram to be the first to climb the giant peaks that rose from the silent ice. Skilled naturalists, these early climbers exhibit powers of detailed observation in their writings that surprise and impress even today.

Ontario geologist Arthur Philemon Coleman's explorations are beautifully documented in *The Canadian Rockies, New and Old Trails*, published in 1912.⁸ Coleman also published a monogram on the glaciers

of the Rockies and Selkirks in 1914, and a major textbook on glacial geology in 1926. These books became windows through which Canadian students began to understand the wonders of their own mountain landscapes.

These early works, though rare now, are a delight to read even as reprints. There is a hint between each of the carefully crafted lines that the nostalgia that has grown up around the early days of climbing and exploring in the Rockies may be as attributable to good period writing as it is to the expansive character of the land. Certainly, these books describe a simpler time. It was easier then to be alone amidst the grandeur of our mountains and to be influenced by their aesthetic.

GREAT STORIES AND STORYTELLERS

THOUGH MUCH OF THE EARLY literature of the Rockies was about mountaineering, there was also a large body of excellent writing that focused on the simple joys of experiencing place. The first “soft” adventure classic published in this century was Mary Schäffer’s elegantly written account of an historic horse trip from Lake Louise to Jasper in 1906. *Old Indian Trails of the Canadian Rockies*, which first appeared in 1911,⁹ is a chronicle of the difficulties Schäffer encountered on her way to acquiring a life-changing appreciation of these mountains. Perhaps because Schäffer was not in the competitive business of climbing, her book offers details about travel seldom present in the accounts of more ambitious mountaineers.

Though it was written thirty-six years before a road penetrated northward from Lake Louise, *Old Indian Trails* is still the best guide ever written on the Icefields Parkway. An American by birth, Mary was so affected by her experiences in the Rockies that, after the death of her husband, she gave up a cultured life in Pennsylvania and moved to Banff permanently in 1913. In so doing, Schäffer became the town’s first notable woman writer.

By the 1920s, the grand landscapes of the Rockies were turning quite a number of tourists into serious writers. Of these, James Monroe Thorington is the most prominent. A successful Philadelphia ophthalmologist, Thorington began climbing extensively in Canada in 1921. After a number of bold first ascents, Thorington became a self-appointed expert on the history of mountaineering in Canada. In 1925, he published a simple narrative of his adventures with books and mountains. *The Glittering Mountains of Canada* was soon recognized

as a masterpiece of mountain writing.¹⁰ Quoted widely even today it is considered required reading for anyone who really loves the Rockies.

Though *The Glittering Mountains of Canada* established his reputation as a mountain writer, it was not Thorington's final contribution to Canadian letters. In 1935, Thorington published the journals and reminiscences of the famous Austrian guide Conrad Kain. *Where the Clouds Can Go* gives a complete firsthand account of pioneering ascents on Mount Robson and dozens of other peaks scaled by Kain and his clients between 1910 and 1930.¹¹ This book inspired a lot of people to climb – and to write.

Perhaps the best book about the forgotten years, however, was written by a Banff boy. Ralph Edwards was a horse packer who guided a number of early mountaineering expeditions into the backcountry of the Rockies. Near the end of his long life, Edwards published his memoirs in a book called *The Trail to the Charmed Land*. You still see it around. It is a plain little book with the silhouette of a pack string in the mountains on the cover. It is a great classic of Canadian mountain writing.

POETS AND NOVELISTS

RALPH CONNOR The first novelist to have lived in the Canadian Rockies was the missionary Rev. Charles William Gordon who lived in Canmore from 1890 until 1893. Gordon wrote abundantly under the pen name of Ralph Connor and, in the first two decades of the twentieth century, was a prominent figure in Canadian letters. His first three novels – *Black Rock*, *The Sky Pilot* and *The Man From Glengarry* – sold more than five million copies, making him as popular in his day as Margaret Atwood is in our time. Though none of his novels deals specifically with mountain themes, *Black Rock* (1900) and *The Patrol of the Sundance Trail* (1914) both take place in locations very familiar to present-day residents of the Bow Valley.¹²

HOWARD O'HAGAN This Jasper resident is a writer that many literary scholars believe has been unfairly ignored. Too often his work is associated just with the Jasper and Mount Robson areas, which were rich sources of his literary inspiration. Reading his work, however, is rather like combing the tailings left behind from twenty years of mining the gold of Western Canadian literature, and stumbling upon a huge and unexpected nugget. It is like coming around the bend on a November trail and finding a fiery paintbrush still in perfect bloom.

Howard O'Hagan was the son of Dr. Thomas O'Hagan, who was for twenty-five years the only doctor in Jasper and is credited with the founding of the community's first hospital. As Howard O'Hagan was born in 1902, he was 22 when his father moved to Jasper. He received a law degree from McGill University in Montreal in 1928 but returned regularly to see his parents. His stories were inspired by summer jobs in the Jasper backcountry.

Critics have suggested that *Tay John*¹³ may have been influenced by O'Hagan's interest in the work of Joseph Conrad. The story is about a partly mythical Métis Messiah whose destiny is to lead his people from the Rocky Mountains back to the Pacific Coast. *Tay John* does not accomplish this goal. He does, however, become Tête Jaune, a legend in the Jasper area of the Rockies, after whom Yellowhead Pass is later named.

While there will never be a true history of this quasi-mythical figure, O'Hagan's novel gives the reader a powerful sense of what the country was like up to and immediately after the Grand Trunk Pacific put its civilizing stamp on the northwest. Despite its remarkable attention to period detail, *Tay John* is not just an historical novel. The protagonist is as much metaphor as he is a character. He stands as a symbol of the bridge the Métis built between Native peoples and invading Europeans. He is also an important link between the landscape and the interloper foreigners whose sense of place, established in Europe or in the East, did not flourish when transplanted to the thin soil of the mountain West.

Until Sid Marty appeared on the Rocky Mountain literary scene in 1973 with a book of poems entitled *Headwaters*,¹⁴ O'Hagan's *Tay John* must surely have been the most important and influential book written on Jasper. Many critics, including Patricia Morley, who offered the introduction to the 1974 New Canadian Library edition that brought the book out of obscurity, have portrayed O'Hagan as one of the country's most important mountain writers. There can be no doubt that O'Hagan got the sense of the Rockies right.

EARLE BIRNEY As soon as people started travelling in the country for pleasure, poetry became a widespread medium for expressing sense of place in the Rockies. Much of the earliest poetry, however, suffers from being too tightly confined by European and American structural conventions. Mountain poetry in this country was not set free from these conventions until Earle Birney began to write about the Rockies in the 1920s.

Alfred Earle Birney was born in a shack near the Langevin Bridge in Calgary on May 13, 1904, but grew up in Banff. Birney's most famous poem, *David*, was written in Toronto in 1940. It is an epic account of the death of a climbing partner in an accident on a talon of rock called "The Finger" on the Sawback Range.

Recognized now as a classic in Canadian literature, *David* was a tribute to Birney's close friend David Cunningham Warden, who fell to his death in the Coast Mountains north of Vancouver in 1927. The setting in the poem, however, is the Rockies. It is the first great and enduring work written about Banff.

Birney was a master of powerful evocations of mountain place. The reader revels in his sunalive weekends, the joy he had in his lengthening coltish muscles, valleys that were steps to the sun's retreats. How can one forget a peak that was thrust up like a fist in a frozen ocean of rock that swirled into valleys the moon could be rolled in? Can't you just see the marching ranges flagged by the fading shreds of shattered storm cloud? You can smell "gentian and saxifrage spilled on the moss." It takes your breath away when you realize you, too, have learned to "read the scroll of coral in limestone and the beetle-seal in the shale of ghostly trilobites." One's mouth puckers around Birney's sunhot raspberries. What mountaineer does not remember when ice "in the morning thaw was a gurgling world of crystal and cold blue chasms, and seracs that shone like frozen saltgreen waves." Who will forget David, after the accident laying on the ledge "still as a broken doll"?

Through *David* and other fine poems including *Bushed* and *Leaving The Park*, Birney found his way into anthologies and school texts that established him as the poet laureate of our mountains. His works started an avalanche of writing about the Rockies.

From the 1970s through the 1980s dozens of books were written about the Rockies. Historical accounts, coffee table picture books, exhibition catalogues, memoirs and guidebooks followed one another in profusion. The literature from this period, however, is almost devoid of novels.

JON WHYTE The 1980s, however, were great years for poetry in Banff. This was the heyday of Jon Whyte, a poet and historian who held court over the environmental conscience and literary tradition of the Bow Valley for twenty years. Though he died in 1992, his influence continues to shape the literature of the Rockies today.



JON WHYTE

The scion of the famous Whyte family in Banff, Jon Whyte held court over the literary and artistic life of the Rocky Mountains for more than twenty years. Though he died in 1992, his profound sense of history and geography continue to inspire a generation of writers, poets, musicians and film-makers.
Photograph by R.W. Sandford.

The scion of one of the area's bedrock pioneer families, Jon Whyte was born in Banff, Alberta on the Ides of March 1941. He remained in Banff until 1956 when he moved with his mother to Medicine Hat. After receiving a B.A. and an M.A. in medieval English at the University of Alberta, Jon then advanced to Stanford University in California. While at Stanford, he pursued a second master's degree, this time in communications. As part of his course work for this degree Jon completed a short biographical film on the early horse packer and guide Jimmy Simpson, a film that would later become a local classic in the mountain history genre.

In 1968, Jon returned to Banff permanently where he was able to apply his considerable mental prowess to the writing of poetry and prose that reflected a profound appreciation for life in the Canadian Rockies. As the manager of Banff's famous Book and Art Den, Jon took it upon himself to react productively to the paucity of good natural and human history writing in Western Canada.

Over the next twenty-four years, until his death in 1992, Jon wrote or contributed to more than twenty books on the Rockies. His best known works include, *The Fells of Brightness: Some Fittes and Starts* (1983), *The Fells of Brightness: Wenkchemna* (1985), *Indians in the Rockies* (1984), and his little gem *Tommy and Lawrence: The Ways and the Trails of Lake O'Hara* (1983).¹⁵

One of the finest of his mountaineering poems, *The Agony of Mrs. Stone*, was written about the death of Winthrop Stone on Mount Eon in July of 1921. It proved that Jon Whyte could tell you stories that were fifty years old and give them the urgency and the drama that made them seem they happened only yesterday.

As the Curator of Heritage Homes at the Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies, an institution founded by his aunt, Jon also committed himself to the encouragement of other local writers in their efforts to come to grips with the history and culture of the Rockies. The mountain writers that he influenced included Brian Patton, Bart Robinson, Sid Marty, Peter Christensen and many, many others. He also collaborated with historian Ted Hart in a number of publications, including a masterwork on the life of painter Carl Rungius.

Whyte was also a source of inspiration for some of Canada's best poets, including local intellectual powerhouse Charles Noble. But Jon did not confine his interest in art to the Rockies. Over the twelve years that Jon worked at the Whyte, he held court over an entire generation of visiting Canadian and foreign artists, writers, musicians and thinkers. Jon also knew many of the world's most active mountaineers and guides. Using the Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies as a vehicle, he was able to continue to elevate the culture of Banff from that of a transient tourist town to a cosmopolitan centre for landscape and art appreciation. As much as anyone in this area's history, Jon Whyte made good writing a part of our local heritage.

THOMAS WHARTON Thomas Wharton is an Alberta writer and the author of a novel entitled *Icefields*.¹⁶ Spare and simple, like the glaciers and frozen peaks he describes, Wharton's writing mirrors the beauty of the high alpine landscape. Only the important features relating to the nature and character of place stand out.

Wharton's characters are similarly constructed. They are reduced to the elemental spareness of the ice over which they wander. Subject to only the most fundamental emotions, we see them come to grips with themselves by coming to grips with the ice and rock and pure light of the icefield upon which his remarkable story unfolds.

Wharton has chosen historical figures that mean a great deal to the history of Canada's mountain national parks, as the prime movers of his spare but haunting story. One of his prime characters was drawn from the adventure narratives of the Earl of Southesk, who travelled through the remote wilderness of what is now Jasper in 1859. Wharton then superimposed Southesk's narrative on the adventures of Norman Collie, who with Hugh Stutfield and Herman Woolley discovered the Columbia Icefield in the summer of 1898. The narratives of these two figures also overlap with those of a famous woman mountaineer, American climber C.S. Thompson, a poet horseman from England, an entrepreneur who initiated snowmobile rides on the glacier, and the leader of the 1925 Japanese Expedition to Mount Alberta.

The key character in *Icefields* is Dr. Edward Byrne. The story begins when Byrne falls in a crevasse on the Arcturus Glacier and discovers the image of a frozen angel in the ice. He returns to England haunted by his accident and by the remarkable woman who has tended him during his convalescence in a settlement near Jasper. After abandoning everything

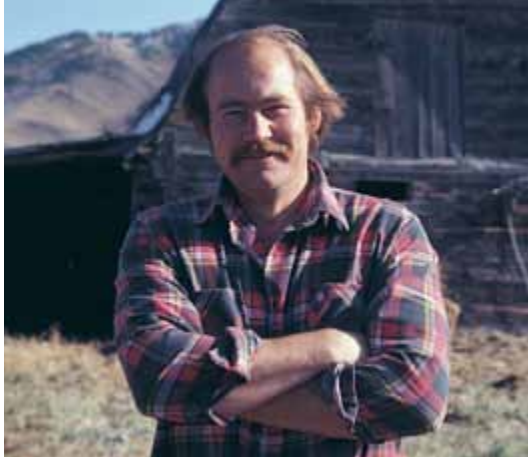
that formerly mattered in England, Byrne returns to the mountains to pursue a growing passion for glaciology. In time he learns enough about the motion of the Arcturus Glacier to determine when the angel of the ice and the pack he lost in the crevasse might emerge at the terminus. Twenty-five years pass before Byrne finds his pack. Meanwhile some interesting things have happened to the angel in the ice, to his Jasper friends and to the landscape in which they live.

With *Icefields*, Wharton demonstrates that literary craftsmanship, engaging storytelling and a profound knowledge of subject are still the basis of a well-expressed sense of mountain place.

SID MARTY If there is one living writer who has defined the Canadian Rockies for our most recent generation it is Sid Marty. Published in 1978, his classic *Men for the Mountains* was the first work of real literature about the link between where and how people live in the mountain national parks. Marty's earthy poetry compares with the earlier works of Earle Birney in its power to define the unique mythology and unforgettable imagery of the Canadian Rockies in the public imagination. Marty's later works *Leaning on the Wind* (1995) and *Switchbacks* (1999) have further established his enduring place in the Canadian literary canon.¹⁷

In the tradition of the best literature, Marty's *The Black Grizzly of Whiskey Creek* succeeds simultaneously on a number of levels.¹⁸ It is important history that captures local life within the unique context of regional ecosystem dynamics. It is an important addition to our ongoing understanding of how best to manage our relationship with the black bears and grizzlies with which we share our national park landscapes. Finally, it is an extraordinary, uniquely Canadian story that took twenty-eight years for Marty to tell.

The Black Grizzly of Whiskey Creek is about a series of bear maulings that took place in Banff townsite in the late summer of 1980. While Sid Marty is thorough in providing the historical context required to understand what led to the maulings, nothing prepares the reader for the horror that builds through the book as the events of that summer unfold. The facts and details of what happened are so terrifying that it would have been easy for the book to become just another grizzly story where the killers are hunted down and the world is made safe again by eliminating yet another dangerous predator. But that would not have satisfied Sid Marty.



SID MARTY

The artist is the one individual in our society who is not afraid to pay the price for standing up for his or her beliefs. Sid Marty's powerful and evocative writing has defined the unique mythology and unforgettable imagery of the Canadian Rockies in the world's imagination in our time. In many ways, Sid is the conscience of the mountain West.

Photograph by R.W. Sandford.

Marty wants the reader to understand what happened within the larger reality of how difficult it is to manage national parks in an era where commercial interests and visitor experience rather than ecosystem values drive management agendas. The author wisely and competently balances the tension between the wilderness and the city by constantly casting the events in the context of how they might have been perceived by the two protagonists in the story, a very large black bear and a giant black grizzly around whom the plot and all human activities in Banff revolved that

summer. This makes for a book so filled with suspense that it is hard to put down.

Though elements of it are terrifying, this story is told with exemplary sensitivity and eloquence. Marty reminds us that the spirit of the great bear that resides at the heart of what makes Banff unique as a world tourism destination. *The Black Grizzly of Whiskey Creek* reminds us that it is the spirit of the bear that defines our humanity within the context of place in the mountain West. Beyond the beauty of the peaks, it is the presence of the bear that makes where and how we live special, and makes us and the Rockies utterly worth visiting.

While the writings of highly considered authors such as Sid Marty and Thomas Wharton have for reasons of their literary merit been read widely outside of the region they describe, it is interesting to note that the best-selling publication in the history of the Canadian Rockies is not a novel but a field guide. Because the ecosystems of the Mountain Parks are still relatively intact, they are possessed of such extraordinary biogeographical diversity that it is difficult to know sometimes what exactly one might be looking at, even from the most ordinary viewpoint. Locals will explain that if you want to know what is actually around you there is one book you cannot be without. That book is Ben Gadd's *Handbook of the Canadian Rockies*.¹⁹ This 831-page tome is an encyclopaedia of the geology, plants, birds, animals, insects, history and trails in the Canadian Rockies from Waterton Lakes National Park to the Yukon. It is a fully illustrated masterwork in the tradition of the great compendia of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It is a reference work that no traveller or mountain writer worth his or her salt should be without.

The other book no one who cares about the Rockies should be without is *The Canadian Rockies Trail Guide*, by Brian Patton and Bart Robinson.²⁰ Its updated editions make this book just as much of a classic today as it was when it was first published in 1971. It is a way into the wilderness, to the heart of place.

WHERE OUR LITERATURE MIGHT TAKE US

DESPITE SOME VERY FINE WRITING, mountain literature in Canada over the last two centuries has confined itself largely to description of place as a backdrop to narrative storytelling. In other words, it is largely a literature all about us.

While some authors like Sid Marty have commented critically on over-development and mismanagement of mountain places, our literature has been largely about what the landscape has done to and for us, not what we have done to the landscape. While some Canadian writers, such as Don Gayton,²¹ Kevin Van Tighem,²² and the writers involved in the Waterton Writers Workshop, explored the overlapping domains of human and ecological history, the environmental situation in Canada does not appear to have reached a state that would warrant the concerns that exist in parts of the United States.

That said, environmental pressures here are mounting quickly and we are only now developing art and literature that tells the story of what happened to the mountains while we were establishing our identities in them. This, however, is a domain that will undoubtedly grow in significance in the coming century. If we want to create a literary culture worthy of place, we will have to hear from more women and more First Nations perspectives. With so much happening in the Rockies, we do not want for things to write about. If nothing else, we may wish to write about what we witnessed in this world, before it's gone.