



Matterhorn of the Rockies

Mount Assiniboine Provincial Park

ON A CLEAR DAY, FROM A HIGH PASS or ridge, one can see 3,618 metre Mount Assiniboine from a hundred kilometres away. It stands sharply and easily recognizable above all the peaks in the southern Rockies. Its remoteness, sheer size, and imposing steepness have made it a place to which hikers and climbers have made pilgrimages since Europeans first came to these mountains. Even today, a visitor to the Rockies is not considered serious within devout mountain circles unless he or she has visited this mountain.

It seems that a disproportionate number of “power places” can be found on the West Slope of the Mountain Parks. We have already described Lake O’Hara. Tucked beneath the Great Divide separating Alberta from British Columbia, Lake O’Hara is the centre of a grand landscape that radiates outward from its shores to create a mountain paradise defined by common rock types, still reflections of enormous peaks which en masse shape uniquely local weather patterns that are expressed in a remarkable local vegetation complex. All of these features are presided over by the known presence of grizzly bears, which provides an added dimension of the sublime to walking through the high meadows at the base of the mountain. The combination of these



**MAP OF MOUNT
ASSINIBOINE
PROVINCIAL PARK**

*Courtesy of Ali Buckingham,
Parks Canada.*

features imbues this concentrated area with signature qualities. Lake O'Hara, quite literally, feels like and smells like no other place in the Rocky Mountains.

Sense of place is defined differently at Mount Assiniboine than in surrounding parks. Though the peaks around it are tall and spectacular, its alpine meadows and turquoise lakes are as perfect as in any in the Rockies, and the presence of the great bear ensures that visitors here are kept at the same heightened level of awareness as they are at Lake O'Hara. All of these elements are eclipsed by the overwhelming presence a single imposing wonder – the mountain itself. This great stone tower completely dominates the surrounding landscape. Even when unseen in darkness or in storm, this peak exerts a powerful, sometimes

terrible presence that can overpower the perceptions of those who stand beneath its sheer walls. The staggering scale of this mountain makes it difficult to comprehend its full physical and aesthetic dimensions or to represent them in word or image.

Archaeological evidence indicates that the first people to visit and frequent the mountain were the Ktunaxa, who lived on the west side of the continental divide. Although there is no proof that Native peoples lived year round near this particular landmark, they would have seen it regularly as they made their way across passes connecting to trading partners on the Great Plains. Because it was a difficult mountain to miss, early explorers did not fail to note the wind-strafed pyramid even if they didn't visit it. Later, more experienced travellers remarked on the similarity between its imposing bulk and the dominating shape of the Matterhorn in the Alps.

The first man to record seeing the mountain was Father De Smet who crossed White Man's Pass in 1845. On his primitive map he marked a big pyramid that in all likelihood was seen from the summit of the pass. In 1884, George Dawson, the genius who headed the Geological Survey of Canada, was working in the eastern part of the Rockies. He recorded seeing the glistening wedge from the summit of Copper Mountain near Banff. In 1885, it was he who gave the mountain its present name. He named it for the Stoney people, a group of Plains Sioux who migrated

REFLECTING ON MOUNT ASSINIBOINE

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Photograph by R.W. Sandford.



into the eastern Rockies once they became equestrian. It was a practice of this tribe to boil their food, including meat. This they did by dropping hot rocks into water-filled skin bags sunken into hollows in the earth. The people were originally called Stone-Boilers, but this name was shortened to Stoney. Their own name for the tribe, however, was Assiniboine.

Due to the size of the mountain, it is not surprising the European sense of place in the Mount Assiniboine area was first established by mountaineers. The first recorded formal expedition that actually went to the mountain was led by Tom Wilson, the famous Banff horse guide and outfitter credited with being the first European to see both Lake Louise and Emerald Lake. His client was one Robert L. Barrett, a Chicago

paper manufacturer and business magnate with a mad desire to climb mountains for sport. In 1893 he and Wilson, with George Fear as cook, rode from the Sunshine area in what is now Banff National Park, with the hope that Barrett would have an opportunity to attempt the big peak from a camp below the face. The season was late, however, and Barrett never got his chance at the mountain.

The first attempt to actually climb Mount Assiniboine took place in the summer of 1899. The expedition was ostensibly led by American Walter Wilcox and included Henry Bryant and Louis Steele. The party left Banff on July 22 with a complete outfit but no climbing guide. They took a route proposed by Tom Wilson that followed Healy Creek to the Sunshine area and over Citadel Pass. Beleaguered by a snowstorm, they camped below Mount Assiniboine at a site Wilcox recognized from his first visit to the mountain in 1895. While Wilcox went back to retrieve a rucksack that had fallen from one of the horses, Bryant and Steele tried to scale the mountain. In 1899 the glacier that pours down the north side of the mountain was much longer than it is today, reaching almost all the way to Lake Magog. The two climbers used this ramp to gain access to the snowfield above. Though the snow conditions made progress slow, the two reached the 3,000 metre mark on the mountain before they were forced back by the advance of yet another storm. Despite a minor accident on the descent, the two made it safely back to the lake where they camped for four days waiting for conditions to improve. During this time Wilcox made many of his famous early photographs of the lake and surrounding panoramas – photographs that are still inspiring. No further progress, however, was made on climbing the mountain during that trip.

The following year another attempt was made on Assiniboine by two amateur climbers from Chicago. Turned back from the summit by the first vertical cliff bands, the brothers Willoughby and English Walling appear to have made something of a mess of the whole affair. Their defeat was made even more ignominious when they lost their way on the trip back from the mountain. If anything, their expedition is notable only for the fact that theirs was the first to use Swiss guides in an attempt on Mount Assiniboine.

A few failures on a large mountain, in the eyes of the mountaineering community at least, can add immeasurably to that mountain's reputation. Mount Assiniboine, it appeared, was a major challenge and the first to climb it would be worthy of laurels and high public praise. It was clear also that the mountain would not be impossible. Quite simply, it would

be conquered by the first person to arrive at the mountain when it was in good condition with enough supplies to make a prolonged push for the summit. To this end, expeditions became increasingly secretive. In a very quiet way, a race was on for the peak.

In the busy 1901 season Wilcox and Bryant were back again, this time with professional Swiss guides. They made a very determined effort to climb the mountain from the southwest but the conditions were not right. It was late in the season and first rain then snow greeted them as they approached the peak. Though they reached the highest point yet attained on the mountain, the expedition was driven back by avalanches and bitter cold. Wilcox was greatly disappointed.

Word quickly got out about the latest failed attempt on the “Canadian Matterhorn.” The failure of the Wilcox expedition was analyzed in detail among climbers camped in the Rockies that summer. It just so happened that 1901 was a big year for Canadian climbing. That summer the Canadian Pacific Railway brought to the Rockies none other than the “Prince of Mountaineers” himself, Sir Edward Whymper. Whymper had made the first ascent of the real Matterhorn in 1865. Surely – to be consistent with his great accomplishments in the Alps – the famous climber would be after the summit prize on Mount Assiniboine. As fate would have it, though, the sixty-two-year-old Whymper had no intention of risking his fame and his life on a mountain he was not sure he could climb.

James Outram heard about Wilcox’s unsuccessful attempt while visiting Whymper in the Yoho Valley. Outram’s interest in Assiniboine was doubtless fuelled by a promise made by his outfitter, Bill Peyto, who claimed he could get Outram’s expedition to the foot of the mountain in only two days. They set out from Banff on August 31, 1901, and true to his word, Peyto had the Outram party at the base of the mountain on the evening of the second day. On September 2, Outram’s party tried from the southwest and failed. The weather was clear the next day and, making use of a cache established in their previous attempt, they made for the peak from the south arête. Spending nearly two glorious hours on the summit, they descended by the north face, traversing the mountain as they returned to camp. They broke camp the next day and headed slowly back to Banff. Another storm struck the mountain as they did so, forcing them to plod through heavy snow. The day they had chosen to climb may have been the only window.

The first ascent by a woman took place in 1904, when Gertrude Benham, a famous English climber, made the ascent with two local



WILD MOUNTAIN WEATHER

The mountain itself is so big it influences local weather. Weather fronts from the Pacific coast and Great Plains often collide around Mount Assiniboine, making it one of the stormiest areas of the Rockies. Local weather changes by the minute. Visitors can often feel the tensions between opposing weather fronts.

Photograph by R.W. Sandford.

guides. Though many other expeditions would come to the mountains seeking ever more challenging routes, the reputation of the Assiniboine area in the 1920s was established, not by climbers per se, but by walking tours offered by Arthur Wheeler. These great loop trips took enthusiasts on long outings in the very best country in the Rockies. Assiniboine was one of his most popular destinations. As it happened, one of Canada's famous mountaineering accidents occurred on one of these walking tours. It was an accident that explains a great deal about the nature and character of Mount Assiniboine and why it is regarded as an almost mythical feature in the mountain West.

THE AGONY OF MRS. STONE

IN 1921 CONRAD KAIN WAS invited to accompany Winthrop and Margaret Stone on one of Arthur Wheeler's celebrated Walking Tours to Mount Assiniboine. Kain's relationship with the Stones began at the Alpine Club Camp's Mount Robson camp in 1913. By the time the Stones had reached Mount Assiniboine in July of 1921, Winthrop considered himself an expert climber who no longer needed a professional guide to make his way successfully to the summits of his alpine ambition. The

Stones had already been to the Assiniboine area with the ACC in 1920 and were anxious to set out for their own adventure. They very much wanted to “crown a big one” in 1921. The big one they chose was Mount Eon, another giant over 3,000 metres located just south of Mount Assiniboine. Unfortunately, Conrad Kain could not be with them when they made their bold attempt.

Mount Eon appears to have been named by James Outram. Its name suggests a timelessness often associated particularly with the big mountains that compose the Great Divide of the Canadian Rockies. The deceiving scale of this monstrous 3,310 metre peak is masked by its close proximity to Mount Assiniboine. The first attempt on the mountain was made in the summer of 1920. Dr. A.W. Wakefield, H.G. Graves and L.H. Lindsay failed to get above 3,000 metres (9,842 feet) on the mountain due to worsening weather and insufficient scouting of the route. The trio reported plenty of rotten rock on the mountain. In 1921, Winthrop and Margaret Stone left Wheeler’s camp on Friday, July 15 for a four-day excursion during which they hoped to make the first ascent of Mount Eon. Both climbers were in excellent physical condition and were well acquainted with the peak from a reconnaissance they did the previous year.

Having sent provisions and their gear ahead to Marvel Pass with a packer, the Stones made a leisurely crossing of Wonder Pass and walked past extraordinary Gloria, Terrapin and Marvel Lakes. They bivouacked a short distance south of the col that divides the east face of Mount Gloria. They spent Saturday, July 16 examining appropriate routes they could take to the summit. On the 17th of July, the couple rose early and, forsaking the northeast shoulder of Eon that foiled the 1920 attempt on the mountain, worked their way south and gained a ledge at about 7,800 feet (2,377 m) and passed around the southeast arête to the base of its wide south face where at its east end there was a yellow-capped outlying tower on the same level as the ledge by which they were certain they could access the summit. With the tower as point of departure, they climbed ledges and broken slopes for nearly 1,700 feet (518 m) before reaching the southeast arête. Another 800 feet (244 m) of climbing brought them to a band of snow up which they were able to kick secure steps in order to access a ledge above. They continued to follow broken ledges and short couloirs of unstable rock to a wide, steep and irregular chimney that opened with dangerously sloping topsides onto the summit. They reached the base of the summit chimney at about 6:00 p.m. It was here that Winthrop Stone, feeling the summit now

within their immediate reach, directed Margaret Stone to a place with secure footing clear of any potential rock fall at the base of chimney and climbed alone until he could see over the top of the chimney.

At this point, however, Dr. Stone was still unclear as to whether or not a higher point on the mountain existed. Mrs. Stone asked if they were near the top. Winthrop replied that he could “see nothing higher” but he would go up and make sure. He added that the rock above the chimney was quite unstable and that Margaret should be careful to keep under cover.

Dr. Stone then climbed out of the chimney and disappeared for a minute or so and shortly afterwards without any warning, a large slab of rock tumbled off from above, passing over Mrs. Stone, and was closely followed by Dr. Stone, who spoke no word but held his ice-axe firmly in his right hand. Horror stricken at the sight, Mrs. Stone braced herself to take the jerk of the rope, not realizing that the Doctor had taken it off to explore beyond its length...¹

Winthrop Stone fell sixty feet (eighteen metres) to a narrow ledge below, and then the body plunged from ledge to ledge until it seemed to Margaret that it must have fallen right to the base of the peak. Then there was only the silence of the muted wind.

It is not surprising that Margaret Stone did not regain her strength and wits for some hours after the accident. By the time she was able to control herself, it was too dark to attempt a descent of the mountain. She was forced to spend the night at the bottom of the chimney only forty feet (twelve metres), from the summit from which her husband had fallen. So began the agony of Mrs. Stone.

When the dawn came Margaret Stone began her gradual descent, all the while searching for her husband in the declining hope that he might still be alive. By following various geological landmarks she remembered from the ascent, Mrs. Stone was able to progress toward the camp they had left early the morning before. Unstrung as she was, however, and exhausted and without food, Margaret was unable to reach the lower ledges before the darkness of her second night on the mountain set in. Her condition worsening, she set out at daybreak the next morning. By keeping a familiar yellow-capped tower in constant view, she was able to reach the landmark by mid-day. In her frantic search for her husband's body, however, she mistook the route at this point and made some fruitless forays onto ledges that led only to steep cliffs. She saw below her a scree slope that seemed to rise from timberline to a ledge below the one she was on. Securing her climbing rope around a

THE BELL TOWER

Winter is an amazing time to visit Mount Assiniboine. The area offers outstanding cross-country skiing in landscapes as pristine as any that still exist in our increasingly crowded world.

Photograph by R.W. Sandford.



rock, she let herself down a broken chimney until she was about ten feet (nine metres) from the ledge below. To her great dismay, she ran out of rope at this point and was forced to drop from the end of the rope to the ledge. To her absolute horror, she then discovered that the ledge did not, indeed, connect to the scree slope she saw below. In fact, the ledge upon which she had dropped broke off on both ends in impossible faces. She could not get down to the scree and she could not reach up to the rope that dangled from the chimney above her.

Margaret Stone tried to build up a pile of rocks so that she could reach the waving end of the rope, but she was too weak to complete the task. She was forced to wait on the ledge for help. Possessing no food or shelter and with no extra clothing beyond the flannel shirt and the knickerbockers in which she had climbed the mountain, Mrs. Stone's condition worsened with each passing hour. She would wait six more days on this ledge, her life sustained only by a trickle of water issuing from a crack under the cliff.

As the Stones had planned to be on their own for a full four days, little thought was given to their absence until their expected return. Even when they did not show up as expected on Monday, July 18, little concern was expressed by packers and guests who waited for them at Assiniboine Camp. Such was the nature of mountaineering that a day's delay in returning from an expedition did not warrant much concern. It was, after all, not unusual for climbers to meet unexpected difficulties, especially on first ascent attempts. By the morning of Tuesday, July 19, however, those down in the valley began to concern themselves with

their friends on the peak. Mr. Raimon of Brooklyn, New York set out from Wheeler's camp with provisions in an attempt to find the missing climbers. He met two other Americans while en route and implored them to aid in the search. When the party still failed to materialize, the Americans sent packer Reno Fritten to the Trail Gang's camp, where they learned from Frank Gombert and Jack Betteridge the location of the Stones' bivouac, which the two horsemen had visited on Sunday, July 17. Gombert led the Americans to the camp and found it empty. Returning to Assiniboine Camp they were pleased to discover that a packer named Childs had already been dispatched to Banff for more qualified help.

On Friday, July 22, a week after the Stones had departed on their expedition, the Swiss guide Rudolf Aemmer arrived at Assiniboine Camp with Bill Peyto, having made the forty-five-mile (seventy-two-kilometre) journey from Banff to Mount Assiniboine in only one day. In consultation with the horsemen who had scouted the area surrounding the bivouac for clues of the route the Stones had taken, it was decided that the south side of Mount Eon was likely the best place to begin the search.

On the morning of Saturday, July 23, Aemmer set out with Bill Peyto, the packer Childs and a member of the North West Mounted Police who had been dispatched to the scene by the Superintendent of Rocky Mountain National Park, as Banff was known then. Ascending Marvel Pass they found the Stones' bivouac just as they had left it eight days before. After making their way up to a broad ledge of Mount Eon and onto the summit of a south spur, they were at last offered a good view of the lower reaches of the mountain's south face. In the failing afternoon light, after long and careful scanning of the mountain with binoculars they were just about ready to abandon the search. Then, when they had given up all hope, they heard it. It was someone calling from a distant point to the west. Startled, they looked again.

On a stone ledge a quarter of a mile away and three hundred feet beneath them (about 0.4 kilometre and 91.4 metres), they spotted Mrs. Stone. They fired a shot to announce to Mrs. Stone that her agony was nearly at an end. Working around the mountainside they were soon on a ledge above her. Rudolf Aemmer descended to the ledge and Mrs. Stone was raised toward the rescue team above. But the eight exposed days alone without food had taken their toll. She was too weak to walk. Aemmer carried her on his back around the base of Mount Eon, a distance of a mile (1.6 km) over the broken and unstable ledges, and down through the moraines to timberline where they bivouacked for the



ASSINIBOINE LODGE

The Marquis degli Albizzi and a ski instructor from Lake Placid, Erling Strom of New York, opened a tourist lodge below Mount Assiniboine in 1929. Strom ran the lodge until 1966, when he relinquished management to his daughter, Siri. Erling Strom continued to visit the lodge in summers until 1978, which marked his fiftieth year in the Rockies. At the time of this writing, Assiniboine Lodge had been operated for twenty years by Sepp and Barb Renner who maintain its rustic charm and grant visitors the same intimate experience of place the first adventurers experienced when they found their way to this remote peak. *Photograph by R.W. Sandford.*

night. She was too weak to be moved from this primitive camp. Fortunately Dr. Fred Bell of Winnipeg joined the party to care for Mrs. Stone. For two days they waited for her to gradually gain enough strength to permit her to be carried by stretcher to Trail Centre Camp. All hands were needed to carry the stretcher the fourteen miles (22.5 km) to Trail Centre where Miss Brown, the manager of the Camp, and Mrs. Fred Bell, did everything they could to revive her tortured body and soul.

The effort applied to Mrs. Stone's evacuation so exhausted the rescuers that a fresh party was called forth to recover Winthrop Stone's body. Arthur Wheeler, who at the time of the accident had been engrossed in an official boundary survey further north, arrived in time to initiate the search. Wheeler's party was comprised of Aemmer, Edward Feuz Jr., Conrad Kain, Lennox Lindsay and Mack and Elizabeth MacCarthy. The packer Ralph Rink was responsible for supplying the party. On August 2, the recovery team arrived at Trail Centre, where they were grateful to find Mrs. Stone in a much-improved state and in the company of her youngest son Richard. Elizabeth MacCarthy, a close friend of Margaret Stone's from their years together in the Purcell Range, chose to stay with her friend while her husband and the others looked for Winthrop Stone's body.

On August 5th, 1921, the recovery team successfully followed the Stones' route to near the base of the chimney just below the summit of Mount Eon. Upon reaching the 10,000 foot ledge (3,048 m) at the south-east arête, Feuz spotted Winthrop Stone's body. Above the snow band Kain recovered his ice axe. Noting how badly broken the summit formation was, the climbers avoided Stone's chimney route to the summit taking instead a badly broken line to the west to the peak, which they reached at 3:00 p.m. By examining Stone's route they were able to clearly establish that Stone had, indeed, made the first ascent of the mountain before he plunged to his death. The recovery team built a cairn in Stone's honour and planted his ice axe in the centre. After photographing the cairn, the climbers retrieved the ice axe for Stone's family.

Aemmer and four others received a special citation from the American Alpine Club for their role in the rescue of Margaret Stone. For Aemmer the rescue was nothing less than a matter of honour. He spoke sincerely and for all the professional guides in the Rockies when he said, "Real guides cannot be heroes. When somebody gets into trouble in the mountains, we go after him, take the necessary risks, and bring him down. Nothing else counts."²

Today, with helicopters and trained rescuers, Margaret Stone would not likely have been so long on Mount Eon. But despite improvements in mountain rescue techniques, the peaks in Mount Assiniboine Park are still wild. Today a dozen parties will climb Mount Assiniboine during a good window of weather. What we have saved in protecting these peaks is a baseline against which anyone with courage and enough strength can make themselves whole by overcoming fear and exhaustion to reach the peak. But you don't have to climb the mountain to bask in its great shadow. All you have to do is visit it.

THE CREATION OF MOUNT ASSINIBOINE PROVINCIAL PARK

UPON THE URGING OF THE Alpine Club of Canada, British Columbia set aside 5,120 hectares of the area on February 6, 1922 as Mount Assiniboine Provincial Park, the seventh in a fledgling park system. One large and five small shelters, known as the Naiset Cabins, were later constructed at Assiniboine as part of an arrangement whereby the Alpine Club of Canada granted Arthur Wheeler a lease to use the properties at two dollars per annum. In 1927, Wheeler sublet the buildings to a half-Russian, half-Italian nobleman who happened to be the Winter Sports



FALL GLORY

"If you are worn out and tired from the daily grind of routine existence. If you need revitalizing and a real rest. If you are nervous, neurotic or dyspeptic. Come and try it for a week or two. The cure is certain and for the remainder of your life the pages of your memory's scrapbook will be replete with scenes and experiences that will recur again and again with the thrill of joy."

*From Arthur Wheeler's Walking and Riding Tours to Mount Assiniboine 1920 (a pamphlet in the possession of the author)
Photograph by R.W. Sandford.*

Director at Lake Placid in New York. All accounts suggest that Marquis Nicholas degli Albizzi was a genuine character. Certainly, few can question his impact on the Assiniboine area.

In the spring of 1928, Albizzi and his friend Erling Strom, who taught skiing at Lake Placid, planned a winter visit to the Assiniboine area. Local outfitters and guides thought the expedition a little impractical and discouraged them from such madness. Undeterred, the duo made their difficult way through the downed timber of the burned-out valleys to the safety of the Naiset Cabins. The weather broke after they arrived and they enjoyed seventeen days of outstanding skiing. So enthusiastic was Albizzi about the potential of the great peak as a visitor attraction that he approached the CPR with a proposal to build a major lodge in the meadows below the mountain. It opened in 1929, but not without problems. The Marquis quickly grew disillusioned with the place and it fell into the hands of outfitter Bill Brewster, who ran it only in summer. Erling Strom, returning from a visit home to Norway, engaged the use of the lodge in the winter months then gradually assumed responsibility for the buildings all year round. Strom ran

it until 1966, when he relinquished management to his daughter, Siri. Strom continued to visit his beloved Assiniboine until 1978, the year that marked his fiftieth year in the Rockies.

In 1973, the park area was increased sevenfold to its present size of 39,050 hectares. It is one of the best-loved places in the Rockies. It is the place in which Arthur Wheeler's mountain spirit appears to have come to reside. You can't seem to escape his presence.

Though some visitors still walk into Mount Assiniboine using Wheeler's favourite route from Sunshine, many people now helicopter to the fabled peak. Assiniboine Lodge has played a significant role in the history of this area of the Canadian Rockies. There is something in the simplicity of the architecture of the main lodge and the tiny line of cabins, which resonates with the character of the place. Visitors often express a feeling 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. There is some kind of indwelling quality of place and it touches a deep chord in those who visit what Wheeler called "this land of forests primeval, of lakes and exquisite blues and greens, of cascading torrents, flower-strewn uplands, wildly tumbling ice-falls, towering rock peaks and cloud-capped mountains massed with snow."³ At Mount Assiniboine, you get to the heart of the mountain landscape immediately, where it doesn't take much time to confront the timeless.

Though Mount Assiniboine is a remarkable place in its own right, it derives much of its wildness from being contiguous with Kootenay to the west and Banff and Kananaskis to the east. What resulted from putting all of these pieces back together again is far greater than the sum of its individual parks. You don't have to climb Mount Assiniboine to appreciate sense of place in the Rockies. The extent of what we saved begets a powerful sense of naturalness rising from the bottom of the valleys right to heights of the peaks.