

Karen Stockham
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Thesis

**“It went down into the very form and fabric of myself”:
Women’s Mountaineering Life-Writing 1808-1960**

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Signature *Karen Stockham*

Abstract

In 1808, a French maid-servant, Marie (or Maria) Paradis, became the first woman to ascend Mont Blanc, thereby establishing her place in women's mountaineering history. Paradis' success was followed by that of a wealthy French countess, Henriette D'Angeville, who successfully summited Mont Blanc in 1838. In her French narrative of the ascent, Mon Excursion Au Mont Blanc en 1838 (translated into English in 1992 by Jennifer Barnes as My Ascent of Mont Blanc), D'Angeville urged women mountaineers to write narratives of their mountaineering, arguing that it was important that they write the "feminine stamp" (xxiv) or feminine experience of mountaineering.

Histories of women's mountaineering, for example, Shirley Angell's history of the women-only Pinnacle Club, Pinnacle Club: A History of Women Climbing, Bill Birkett and Bill Peascod's 1989 book, Women Climbing: 200 Years of Achievement bring into the public domain a largely hidden history of women's mountaineering but provide only tantalising glimpses of the feminine mountaineering experience. Drawing on life-writing scholarship, this thesis explores women's mountaineering from the early nineteenth century to 1960, reading a range of published and non-published life-writings of women mountaineers including autobiographies, letters and diaries to explore the myriad and complex nuances in women's mountaineering beyond descriptive history. The thesis also draws on wider women's mountaineering literature in the form of articles published by women mountaineers in the Year Books published by the Ladies' Alpine Club, the journal of the women-only Pinnacle Club and occasional articles published within other mountaineering publications such as the Alpine Journal.

Taking Paradis' achievement as the historical starting point, my thesis reads women's mountaineering narratives through a critical lens which explores the feminine experience of mountaineering using discourses of gender and domesticity. I specifically examine how women mountaineers challenged the culturally constructed values informing their role and identity as women and how they variously narrate their experience to write the "feminine stamp" in mountaineering literature. Whilst the term "feminine stamp" might suggest a universality of experience both in women's mountaineering and in their narratives – and could therefore claim to be representing

a form of essentialism – my thesis will follow the work of Alison Stone in suggesting that whilst the women in this thesis have a common gender, their experience of and relationship to mountaineering is individual. As Stone writes, women need to be “reconceived as a specifically non-unified type of social group” (2) in order that their individuality may be represented. However, Stone also points out there are specific historical instances – women’s suffrage for example – which show that “women can still exist as a determinate group, susceptible to collective mobilisation” (25). For that reason, the focus of my thesis ranges from case studies of individual women mountaineers – for example, Paradis, D’Angeville, Gertrude Bell, Dorothy Pilley and others – to an evaluation of the role played by collective initiatives such as *les cordées féminines* (women-only ropes in mountaineering), mobilised as a result of membership of a community of women mountaineers. My thesis will examine the role of the Ladies’ Alpine Club and Pinnacle Club in enabling and progressing collective developments in women’s mountaineering and fills a gap in existing research studies of women’s mountaineering literature by reading and considering the previously un-researched diaries of Dorothy Pilley alongside collective achievements. These narratives are placed within wider life-writing discourse and specific cultural and historical contexts such as the *fin de siècle* in order to offer insights into how women transcended their gendered role in order to become mountaineers. The primary focus of this thesis, for reasons of space and focus is on the life-writings of UK and European women mountaineers.

This thesis notes the inter-disciplinary and international nature of research into women’s mountaineering in the fields of leisure and sports studies, geography, feminist and women’s studies, sociology, history and literary studies and, where appropriate, draws on this wider literature for comparative purposes.

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