After the Matterhorns

The most spectacular burst of first ascents in the Rocky Mountains never would have happened if not for a chance meeting at Mount Stephen House in Field, British Columbia, a meeting that wouldn't have occurred if not for the most significant accident in mountaineering history.

"The Ascent of the Matterhorn, on July 14th 1865: The Fall." Gustave Dore, lithograph.

Zac Robinson and Stephen Slemon

Edward Whymper with ice axe and haversack, 1910. Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies, NA66-509.

BY THE SUMMER OF 1901, Edward Whymper was a defeated man. Although his 1865 first ascent of the Matterhorn brought the young English illustrator and amateur climber fame—the ascent is said to have crowned the great age of British mountaineering—the disastrous descent, during which a novice party member slipped into one of the guides, a rope broke and four men died, earned for Whymper an accompanying reputation that would stay with him for life: a reputation for intemperance, for reckless amateurism and for monumental self-privilege.

Never the most sociable of persons, Whymper managed his post-Matterhorn notoriety through self-pity—"Climb if you will," he would write, "but remember … that a momentary negligence may destroy the happiness of a lifetime"—through guidebook writing, through lecturing and through adventure. In Greenland, he drove across the glaciated landscape on a dog sled. In the Andes, he became the first westerner to climb to 20,000 feet. Whymper received the Royal Geographical Society's Gold Medal and was proposed for—but was not granted—membership in the Royal Society. Honoured maybe, but never wholly admired, Whymper aged inelegantly. He never again climbed meaningfully in the Alps. When he spoke about the Matterhorn incident, he seemed mostly interested in proving that he, himself, was not to blame.

Whypmer's established reputation for mountaineering achievement, however, and for self-promotion, stood him in good stead in 1900 when he approached the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) with a business proposal. Having seen the Canadian Rockies through a train window, Whymper came up with an advertising stratagem. In exchange for an all-expenses-paid visit for the summer of 1901, Whymper would undertake to speak favourably about the Canadian mountains, and about the CPR's magnificent hotels, in newspaper articles and in his public lectures in England and Europe. The railway company would cover not only Whymper's own transportation and maintenance costs, but also those of his four top-tier Swiss guides: Christian Klucker, Joseph Bossoney, James Pollinger and Christian Kaufmann. So outfitted, it was implied, Whymper and his unparalleled support team would climb in the Rocky Mountains, achieve Canadian greatness, and then profitably boast about it. The CPR couldn't have been more pleased.

And so in the summer of 1901, when Whymper and his entourage arrived in the Rockies, rumours were already circulating that the famous alpinist had come across the ocean specifically to achieve the first ascent of the so-called "Matterhorn of the North America"— Mount Assiniboine. In reality, the 62-year-old—racked as he was with rheumatism and insomnia—had no interest in attempting Assiniboine, or indeed anything that resembled a real mountaineering challenge. Whymper's difficult climbs were by now well behind him, and he knew it even if others, like the CPR, continued to mistake the shadow for the man. What's more, Whypmer had a marketable reputation to uphold. He had no intention of risking it through a failed attempt on a second-rate peak.

Instead, Whymper—superbly outfitted and supremely well guided—dutifully walked up a handful of peaks near Vermillion Pass, and the summer wore on. His brilliant Swiss guides, and his chief outfitter Bill Peyto, quickly figured out that Whymper's mountaineering summer was not going to end with a bang. Klucker felt underutilized. "We found to our regret that Whymper's ability was not of high order," Klucker later wrote, acidly. All felt despondent. Whymper's arrogance, his abrupt approach to human management and his constant hard drinking didn't help the situation. So poisonous was the atmosphere in camp that Peyto simply quit. An enraged Whymper stomped from his camp in the Yoho Valley down into the town of Field in search of new help.

An imposing array of empty liquor bottles and crates (bearing the caption "The Remains of E. Whymper") from Whymper's exploration of the Ice River Valley, 1901. Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies, NA66-323.

And there, at the CPR's elegant Mount Stephen House, Whymper met the man who would prove himself the most dynamic force ever to whirlwind through the Rockies—James Outram. Outram's grandfather had so distinguished himself in the so-called "Indian Mutiny" of 1857 that Britain's parliament had voted him a hereditary Baronetcy and erected a statue to him on the Victoria Embankment. Outram was destined to inherit the title. But "a brain collapse from overwork," as he explained in his 1905 book *In the Heart of the Canadian Rockies*, "impelled" the 36-year-old abruptly to resign his position as vicar of St. Peter's Church in Ipswich the preceding summer, to board a steamship for North America and to seek "the mountain heights for mental rest and physical recuperation." Commentators on mountaineering history—Esther Fraser, for example, and Bob Sandford—would later identify Outram's malady more precisely as "a substantial nervous breakdown." It resulted in one of the most frenzied periods of climbing ever witnessed in the Canadian Rockies.

Some striking similarities linked the two displaced Englishmen in that summer of 1901. Both Whymper and Outram were unabashedly competitive in their pursuit of first ascents—Whymper, famously, had trundled rocks down onto a competing Italian team from his first-ascent perch on the Matterhorn summit. Both men had come to the Canadian Rockies in the prolonged aftershock of personal disaster—and with a view to a kind of restoration. And both were capable of arousing strong feelings of dislike from hired subordinates and fellow mountaineers alike. No wonder Whymper hastened to

invite the upper-class, energetic and companionably snobbish Englishman to join his superbly outfitted climbing party.

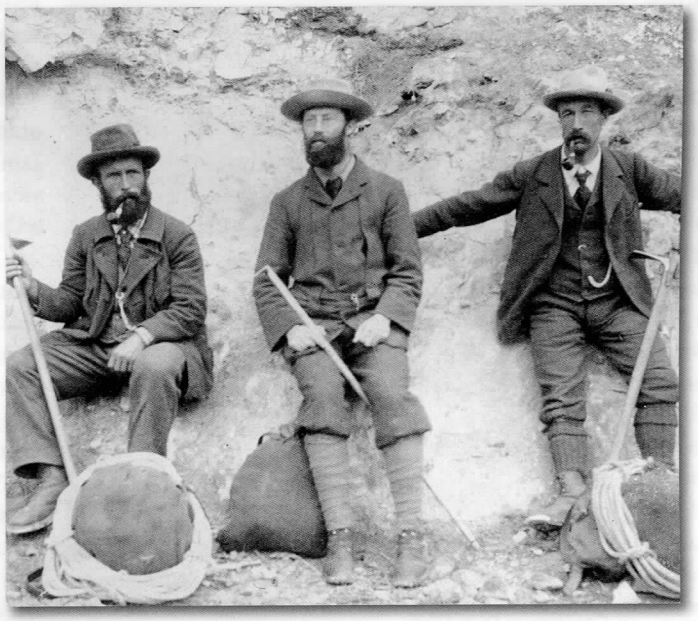
Outram accepted at once. The meeting and invitation was a stroke of great luck for the lanky vicar who's foremost desire was an ascent of "the most talked-of peak in the Canadian Rockies"—Assiniboine. He had seen it from the summit of Cascade Mountain a year earlier, during his first summer in the Rockies, but hadn't the resources on hand necessary for the venture. But now, with Whymper's team at his disposal, Outram suddenly found himself with *everything*: Swiss guides, the latest equipment, a local outfitter and time.

With Tom Martin now hired in place of the offended Bill Peyto and a kindred spirit joining him in the position of client privilege, Whypmer and his party found some momentary new energy and were able to rack up a series of modest first ascents in the Yoho Valley area: Mont de Poilus (then called Mount Habel), Mount Collie, Trolltinder Mountain and Isolated Peak. Unfortunately for Outram though, Whymper remained disinterested in Mount Assiniboine. Even the news of a nearly successful attempt on Assiniboine that summer, by the formidable Americans Walter Wilcox and Henry Bryant with the great Swiss guide Edouard Feuz, failed to reanimate Whymper's mountaineering ambition. But for Outram, the tidings "added fuel to the already consuming desire," not only to ascend the mountain, but to do so first.

The news of that near success on Assiniboine had been delivered by none other than Bill Peyto. Whatever sour feelings Peyto harboured for his stubborn employer, this competition, now, for the still-unclimbed Assiniboine proved a significant motivator for rethinking his resentments, and so Peyto had returned to Whymper's camp with a call to action. "For experienced mountaineers," he announced, "there was no question of a failure." Whymper proved resolutely unmoved by this challenge, but not so for James Outram. Here was a chance for Whymper's party to achieve something, even if Whymper, himself, wasn't a part of it. And so an arrangement was made: Peyto pledged his services to the parson, and Whymper's ambivalence blessed the deal. With that, the camp disbanded. Whymper took what remained of his party off to the Ice River area (south of Mount Goodsir) and finished out his summer in further campsite drink.

At this point, the two career trajectories also parted. Over the next four years Whymper would return often to the Rockies, ostensibly to evaluate their tourist potential for the CPR, but in all likelihood to run out his handsomely sponsored "freebie" through whatever publicity his name could still attract. In the end, Whymper published no official report of his travels. He wrote very little about the mountaineering region and promoted it even less. He did, though, pen a handful of uncomplimentary remarks about the people he had employed. Writing well after Whymper's death, Arthur O. Wheeler, long-time director of the Alpine Club of Canada (ACC), concluded that Whymper "came with the intention of discovering the Canadian Rockies and found that they had already been discovered."

But for James Outram, the disbanding of the Whymper camp would prove to be a new, and redemptive, beginning. From the Yoho Valley, Outram and Peyto left for Field, where—through the cooperation of Annie Mollison, "the incomparable manager" of Mount Stephen House—they acquired "provisions, blankets, etc.," and Swiss guides Christian Bohren and Christian Häsler. After a quick train ride to Banff, and two days of hard trekking, the party made history. Outram, Bohren and Häsler climbed Mount Assiniboine from the south and, despite nervous objections from the guides, boldly descended by the north, thus traversing the peak. It was a brilliant coup. "We stood as conquerors," Outram would write, "11,860 feet above the sea ... on the loftiest spot in Canada on which a human foot had then been planted." Outram's ascent of the "Canadian Matterhorn" would also prove to be economically sublime. The first ascent firmly established his reputation as a mountaineer, and the CPR put its full support behind Outram, granting to him for the summer of 1902 all the amenities it had provided the year before for Whymper, including the services of Christian Kaufman.

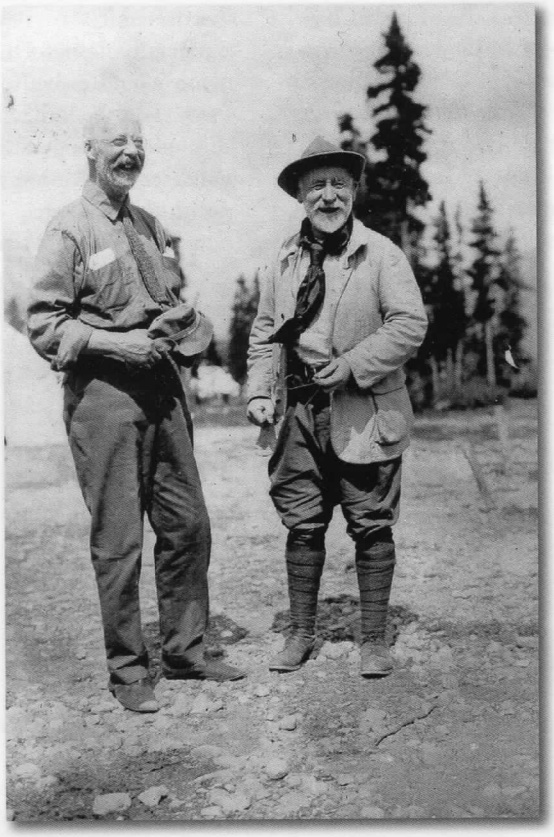


After the first ascent of Mount Assiniboine, 1901. Left to Right: Christian Häsler, James Outram and Christian Bohren. Photo: J.H. Scattergood. Courtesy of the American Alpine Journal.

That third and last season of Outram's climbing convalescence produced a record of first ascents that, as Chic Scott, an authority on mountaineering history in the Rockies, puts it, simply "defied description." "Never before or since," writes Scott, "has a climber had such an impact in such a short time." Throughout the summer of 1902, Outram racked up first ascents of an astonishing number of peaks: Mount Columbia, Mount Bryce, Mount Forbes, Mount Freshfield, Mount Lyell, Mount Alexandra and Mount Wilson. His smash-and-grab approach to peak-bagging offended many of his contemporaries, who quietly loathed him as "the interloper." The great

J. Norman Collie bemoaned the squandering of pioneering work that he and climbers like Walter Wilcox had accomplished, only to have "all the cream skimmed off by a man who has had all the hard work done for him, not to mention the assistance of the Swiss guides." But as far as the public was concerned, Outram had ascended to the height of mountaineering greatness. Media reports all cast the vicar as a youthful Whymper, a characterization easily made due to Assiniboine's moniker. That Outram had come to Canada for rest and reprieve from "a brain collapse," but instead built "cairns on fully half of the major unclimbed summits of the Rockies," made his mountaineering accomplishments all the more extraordinary.

"A brain collapse from overwork." It's a great story of bravery, of pushing beyond debilitating adversity into triumph, and it has passed into mountaineering history as one of Canada's grand narratives of climbing achievement. Outram's one short explanatory phrase, tossed into the front matter of his 450-page-plus memoir *In the Heart of the Canadian Rockies* (1905), is his only overt written indication that all was not well with him during this period. But subtler hints of something rather darker in the background abound in Outram's book: "[A]mong such lonely or on such solitary mountaintops as those in Canada," Outram wrote, "there may be found the long-sought sanctuary of the storm-tossed soul." And, here, in the Rockies, "burdens that seemed too heavy to be borne are rolled away. The throb of pain is stilled." Such indications of a haunted mountaineer, climbing perhaps in search of some kind of redemption, further buttress the curious parallel between our two "Matterhorn" ascentionists. Whymper, too, was persistently haunted by an insuperable burden from the past. "Every night," Whymper wrote, in his celebrated memoir *Scrambles amongst the Alps in the years 1860-1869* (1871), "do you understand, I see my comrades of the Matterhorn slipping on their backs, their arms outstretched, one after the other, in perfect order at equal distances. Croz the guide, first, then Hadow, then Hudson, and lastly Douglas. Yes, I shall always see them...."



James Outram and Arthur O. Wheeler at the ACC's Mount Robson Camp, 1924. Photo: Malcolm Geddes. Courtesy of Ruth Elliot.

New evidence, however, has recently come to light, and we now know that Outram did not actually come to Canada simply to recover from a "brain collapse." Paul R. Deslandes, a historian of imperialism and sexuality at the University of Vermont, gained access to a series of private letters, written in 1902 and 1903 between Frank Outram, James Outram's younger brother, and Dr. Henry Stearns, superintendent at the Hartford Retreat for the Insane, in Connecticut. In a scholarly article published in 2009 in the journal *Gender and History*, Deslandes discloses a hidden reason behind Outram's sudden departure in 1900 for Canada. "A thick packet of documents," writes Deslandes, "placed haphazardly among the papers of an eminent Connecticut doctor" revealed that "grave charges" were about "to be brought against James for immoral conduct with choir boys." Frank Outram's letters are withholding about "the precise nature of Outram's sexual exploits," Deslandes reports. But they do "offer the following explicit qualification: 'I never heard of any actual case of sodomy, but of fondling and masturbating the boys.'"

"Outram's actions," Deslandes continues, "could have easily resulted in criminal prosecution under the restrictive laws governing male same-sex relations." And so "Frank Outram and the youngest of his brothers, William, were instructed by a group of local authorities in Ipswich to take James Outram 'away at once' if they were to have any hope of 'preventing a Public Scandal.'"

This new evidence explains why Outram's eminent London family sent him to Vancouver in 1900. Whatever one makes of Frank Outram's description of his brother's "immoral conduct," the British Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 had made "gross indecency" between males, irrespective of age, a criminal offense in Britain, and in the wake of Oscar Wilde's famous trial for sodomy only five years earlier, it was evident that even upper-class citizens could be incarcerated for their sexual practice. Outram's family wanted him away from the scene of rumour, and themselves safe from the possibility of scandal.

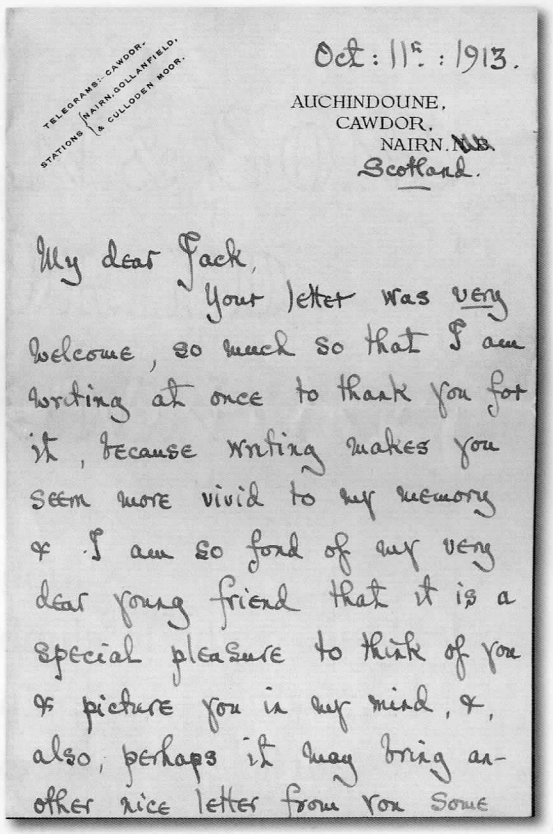
This packet of letters also explains why it was that Outram's spectacular Rocky Mountain climbing ended so abruptly after the summer of 1902. Deslandes reports that in October, a "family friend" from Vancouver wrote to the Outrams in London, saying that "if [James] is allowed to remain here in British Columbia ... he will certainly involve himself in most serious trouble, and bring public disgrace upon his name." The "friend's" letter goes on to say that "a relapse" in Outram's behaviour had somehow "outraged the hospitality of a friend up-the-country," and to remind the Outrams of their "imperative duty" to protect their reputation. Writing to his elder brother as "Father's representative," Frank Outram commanded

James to "immediately put yourself in this Dr.'s [Stearns] hands absolutely and carry out whatever treatment he may specify."

One more letter adds to the narrative. A diagnostic letter of introduction, written by Sir George Henry Savage—eminent British psychiatrist, doctor to Virginia Woolf and friend to the Outram family—brings to Dr. Henry Stearns' "professional notice the Rev. Mr. Outram who I regret to say is a sexual pervert or invert. He has been in danger in England & I hear he has been in Vancouver in danger. I feel the only way is for someone to get a medical hold on him & if possible get him into some retreat for treatment & observation."

Outram, reports Deslandes, entered the Hartford Retreat in December 1902 under the assumed name "Mr. James." He proved himself a model patient: "always pleasant and gentlemanly"; "physically active"; he even entertained others with a "lecture illustrated by lantern, treating of his visits to the Canadian Rockies." Outram was released from care in June 1903.

What became of him immediately following his release from "treatment" is unclear. He was in Colorado in 1908. By 1912, he had returned permanently to Canada, this time to Vermilion, Alberta, where he underwent yet another transformation. Having inherited his father's baronetcy, the now *Sir* James Outram established himself as a gentleman capitalist and land developer. During the First World War, he commanded Vermillion's militia company and served as an instructor at the Provisional School of Infantry (Camp Sarcee) in Calgary. From 1920 to 1924, he worked in Calgary as an accountant-auditor and assumed senior positions in both the pro-British Loyal Orange Association and the ACC. In 1921, at the age of 56, he married a family friend, Lillian Mary Balfour of Brighton, England. Their life together was brief. Outram died in March 1925 after suffering a stroke. He was buried in Royal Oak Park Cemetery in Victoria, B.C.


TELEGRAMS: CAWDOR.
STATIONS NAIRN, COLLANFIELD & CULLODEN MOOR.

Oct: 11th: 1913.

AUCHINDOUNE,
CAWDOR,
NAIRN. N.B.
Scotland.

My dear Jack,

Your letter was very welcome, so much so that I am writing at once to thank you for it, because writing makes you seem more vivid to my memory & I am so fond of my very dear young friend that it is a special pleasure to think of you & picture you in my mind, &, also, perhaps it may bring another nice letter from you some

James Outram to John Davenall Turner, 11 October 1913. Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies, M526.

WAS JAMES OUTRAM, as Frank Outram's letter implies, a predatory pederast, sent to the outposts of empire to avoid detection for impropriety? Did he climb so energetically in search of moral as well as physical restoration? Or was Outram just another victimized homosexual of his time, in search of liberty from rumour, inelegant speculation and unfair social restraint, a search that led him to the mountains, to self-affirmation within the "freedom of the hills"? Because of tightened privacy laws in the United States governing patient records, the Outram records in the Institute of Living Archives in Hartfort, Connecticut, are now closed in perpetuity. But even were they open, we still wouldn't really know.

A rather smaller packet of letters housed in the Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies in Banff, however, discloses a little more of the persistent ambivalence of James Outram as historical icon. In one of those letters, Outram writes from Auchindoune, Cawdor, Scotland, October 11, 1913, to "My Dear Jack" in Edmonton, then aged 13. "I am so fond of my dear young friend," reads the letter,

"that it is a special pleasure to think of you and picture you in my mind, & also, perhaps it may bring another nice letter from you some day when you feel inclined to do a kind action to an old man who loves you. I know letter-writing is an uncongenial task for a boy of your age, especially when the office claims so much of your time... Thank you also ever so much for the last sentence 'with much love,' which I very greatly appreciate: I hope it is really so, though I can hardly see how you can love an ugly old man like me, when we have not seen very much of one another. I do like to think you do, however, and hope you will more still when we get better acquainted, because I loved you the very first time I saw you."

Was "Jack" yet another in a series of children Outram placed at risk, the letter to him evidence of a lifelong continuation of the alleged improprieties of 1900? Or can Outram's letter be read as evidence of an adaptive disposition, titled London vicar turned mountain climber, again turned mentor, helping a young prairie office boy find his own way of seeing beyond his present confinement into a wider world? Despite his lack of formal training, "Jack"—John Davenall Turner—would nevertheless grow up to be one of Western Canada's most celebrated painters of the outdoors. He is especially well known for his paintings of the foothills, with the Rocky Mountains in the background.

About the Authors

Zac Robinson and Stephen Slemon are professors at the University of Alberta in Edmonton. The former is a historian, the latter a scholar of literature. Both enthusiastically flail up mountains and read entirely too many books on the subject. Robinson currently serves as the ACC's VP for Activities.