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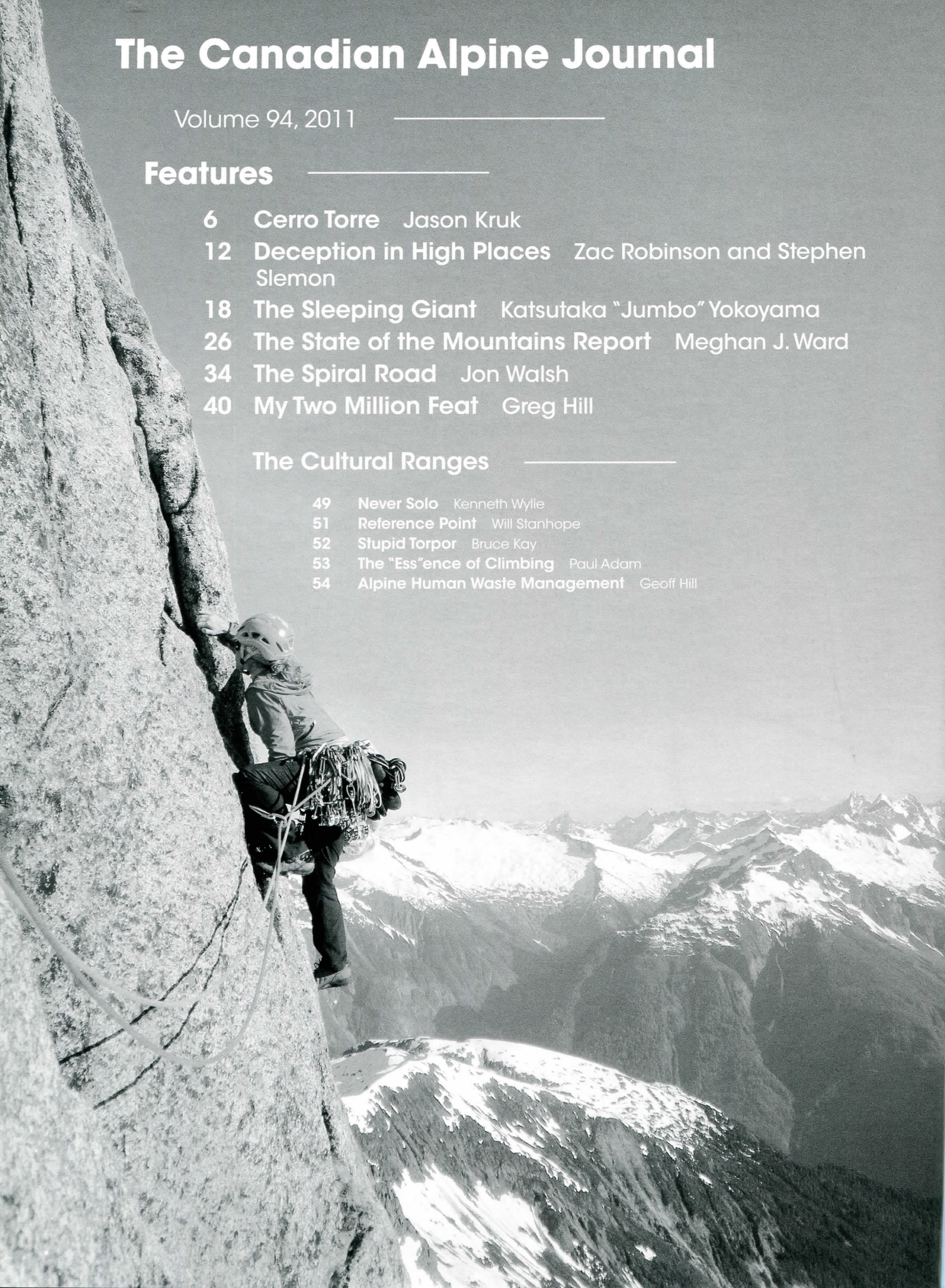
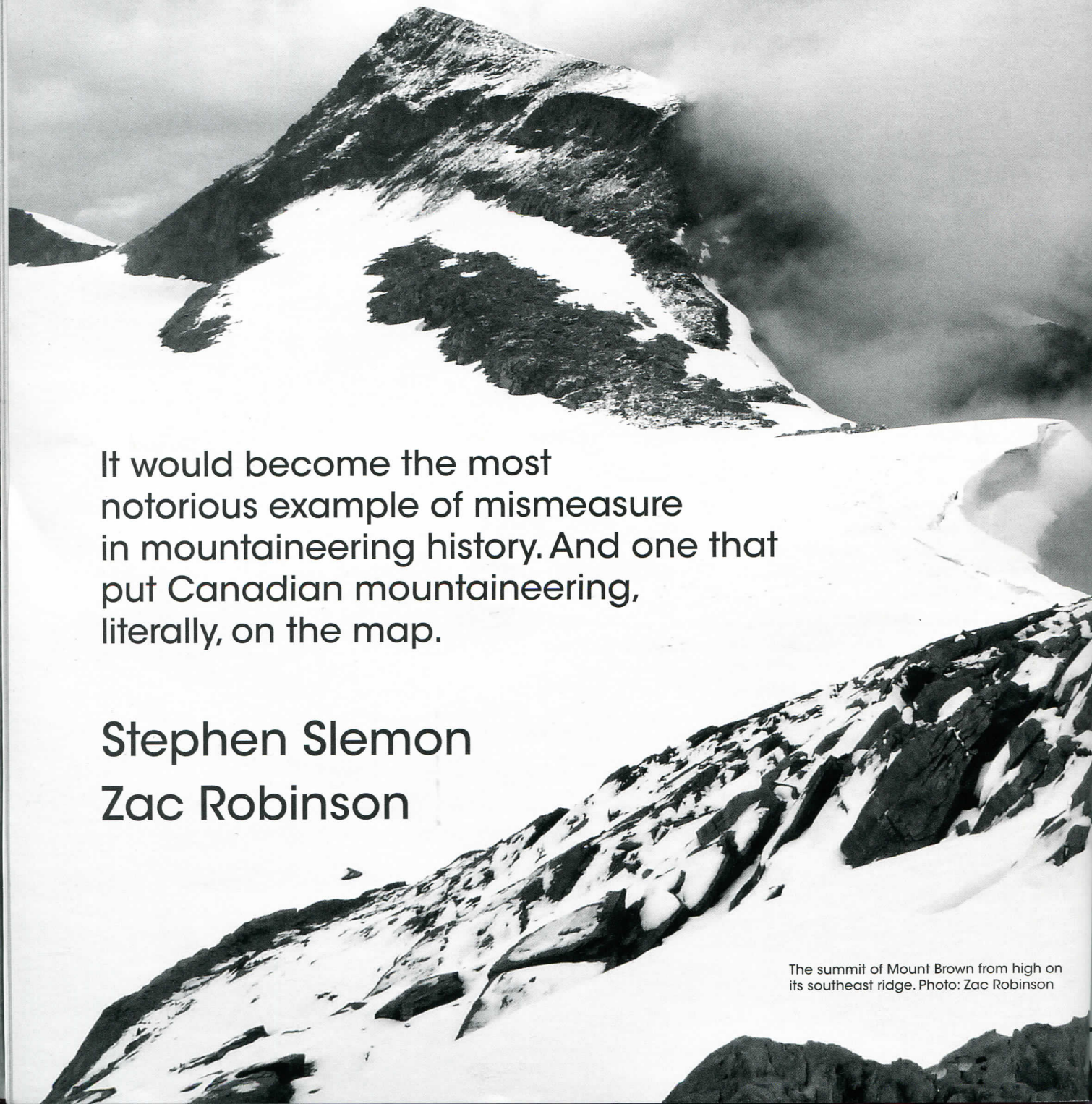
Features

The Cultural Ranges



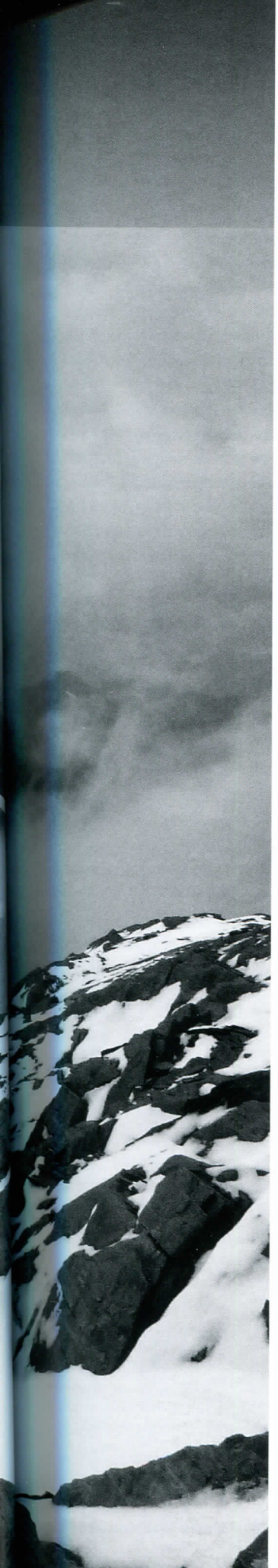
DECEPTION in High Places



It would become the most notorious example of mismeasure in mountaineering history. And one that put Canadian mountaineering, literally, on the map.

Stephen Slemon
Zac Robinson

The summit of Mount Brown from high on its southeast ridge. Photo: Zac Robinson



In the spring of 1827, David Douglas, a botanical collector in the employ of Horticultural Society of London, was on his way back from what he hoped would prove to have been a career-making expedition, gathering plant specimens in Western Canada and the U.S. He had already prepared and shipped seeds and specimens of many kinds: a flowering currant, a yellow lupine, a purple-and-yellow peony and, most crucially for his imagined future, some cones from a giant "sugar pine" that he had come across in Oregon. Douglas's highest hope was that at least some of his botanical finds would turn out to be "originals"—plants as yet unknown in Europe—but of this he couldn't really be sure. For although Douglas had sent many specimens back to the Horticultural Society, ones that seemed new to him, he hadn't actually analysed and classified those specimens. That kind of intellectual work belonged to professional botanists, men of the educated upper crust, and Douglas was a self-taught mason's son. Seven years earlier, while working as a gardener at Glasgow University, Douglas had been taken in hand by William Jackson Hooker, professor of botany. Hooker had discovered an aptitude in the young Scot, trained him in the art of flower pressing and drying, and sent him down to the Horticultural Society of London with a view to carrying out exploratory fieldwork. Soon after, Douglas was shipped out to Philadelphia and began his new career by collecting furiously. His botanical specimens, however, had so far met with minimal success back in London. A chance at redemption came in 1824, when the Hudson's Bay Company agreed to sponsor a botanical collection expedition along the Columbia River, and Douglas—again, with help from Hooker—secured the position. And so on May 1, 1827, Douglas found himself at Athabasca Pass, travelling east along the fur-trade trail over the Great Divide, and harbouring hopes for a very different type of upward mobility than the kind for which he was about to become so disturbingly famous.

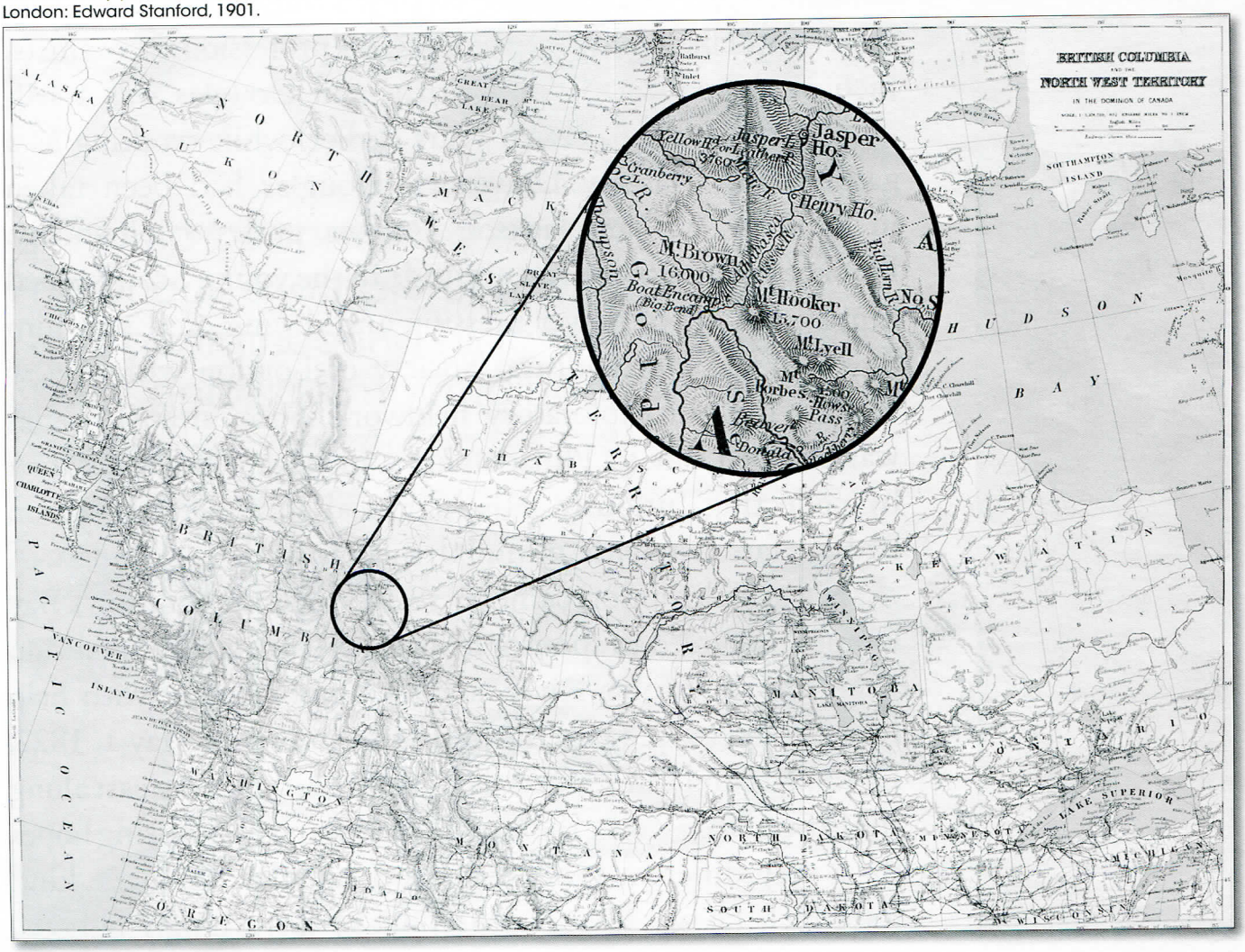
"I set out," Douglas wrote later, in his 1828 narrative titled *A Sketch of a Journey to the North-Western Parts of the Continent of America During the Years 1824, 1825, 1826, and 1827*, "with the view of ascending what appeared to be the highest peak" guarding the height of land. Why he did so remains unclear. Professionally, Douglas's interest in mountains ended at the treeline. Though in Douglas's day people did hike up mountains for exercise or leisure, mountain climbing itself, as technique and sport, was hardly a consolidated activity. The birth of alpine-club culture was still decades away in England. But Romanticism, and the Grand Tour in Europe, had made mountain viewing fashionable, in part for the capacity of mountains to evoke a sense of awe in the face of the sublime. Whatever the case, Douglas's moment of Romantic wanderlust on that May 1 would produce what some have called the first mountaineering ascent in North America.

"The height from its apparent base exceeds 6,000 feet, 17,000 feet above the level of the sea," Douglas continued. "1,200 feet of eternal ice. The view from the summit is of that cast too awful to afford pleasure—nothing as far as the eye can reach in every direction but mountains towering above each other, rugged beyond all description." And then the Romanticism in Douglas's writing surrenders to the prose of social climbing. "This peak, the highest yet known in the Northern Continent of America, I felt a sincere pleasure in naming MOUNT BROWN, in honour of R. Brown, Esq., the illustrious botanist, no less distinguished by the amiable qualities of his refined mind. A little to the south is one nearly of the same height, rising more into a sharp point, which I named MOUNT HOOKER, in honour of my early patron the enlightened and learned Professor of Botany in the University of Glasgow."

As every reader of the *Canadian Alpine Journal* (*CAJ*) knows, nothing in the Canadian Rockies rises to anywhere near 17,000 feet above sea level. The peak now named Mount Hooker—and there's good evidence to suggest that Douglas's Mount Hooker was, in fact, the nearby (and significantly lower) McGillivray's Rock—rises to a reasonably respectable 10,781 feet, 85th highest in the range. At 9,184 feet, Mount Brown looms to only about 600 feet higher than Mount Lady Macdonald, a pleasant day-hike just north of Canmore.

But it's not always the facts that make history. Hope and

Since first appearing on a map in 1829, Mount Brown and Mount Hooker remained the highest points on any map and atlas showing North America until the early years of the 20th century. *British Columbia and the North West Territory in the Dominion of Canada*. London Atlas Series. London: Edward Stanford, 1901.



pity play their own compositional part in this tale. David Douglas returned to London to discover that many of his samples *had* proven to be "originals." Within months, he was elected to membership in the Linnean Society, the Zoological Society and the Geological Society with the usual membership fees waived. John Murray, the famous publisher of Albemarle Street, awarded him a book contract—it was to be *the* book of the year—and Murray wanted a ripping yarn. It was an extraordinary honour. Murray specialized in books of travel, exploration and adventure (like, for instance, Captain John Franklin's *Narrative of a Journey to the Shore of the Polar Sea, in the Years 1819, 1820, 1821, 1822* [1823] and Charles Darwin's *The Origins of Species* [1859]), but he had never before considered a work by an ordinary botanical collector. Douglas, however, wanted to add botanical classification to his exploration memoir, and so he threw himself into scientific self-training in the Linnaean system. And here his social ascent ended. He was invited to read a paper to the Linnean Society, and would have done so himself, without the usual professional elocutionist, had he not succumbed to a paralyzing nervousness on the day. Overwhelmed by feelings of misgiving and inferiority, he delayed on the Murray book contract as the self-education continued. The manuscript stalled out at one-thirteenth the length of his field notes. It was never submitted for publication. Broken, the would-be scientist accepted a contract from Hooker to help prepare the map for the professor's forthcoming magnum opus on the plant life of North America, *Flora Boreali-Americana* (1829). He departed soon after on another specimen-collecting expedition to the west coast of North America and never returned to England. The fact that Douglas died in 1834 under bizarre circumstances—his body was found, lifeless and trampled, at the bottom of an open pit dug to trap wild bulls near Mount Mauna Kea in Hawaii—fuelled speculation of foul play, even suicide. He was 35 years of age.

Douglas, David (1798-1834). From *Curtis's botanical magazine; or flower garden displayed.* London: Samual Curtis, 1836, volume 63. Lithograph by R. Martin & Co. (sheet 156 x 253 mm).

Hooker privately wondered about Douglas's mountaintop measurements, suspecting they were "egregiously overrated." In the end, the heights were both reduced by about 1,000 feet. But he felt sufficiently grateful to his specimen collector to include Douglas's Rocky Mountain giants on the *Flora Boreali-Americana* book map; mementoes, it would seem, of a life that had not reached its professional summit. *That* map first presents two high mountains in the Canadian Rockies, each with Douglas's hopeful name, each with only a little taken off the top: Mount Brown at 16,000 feet, Mount Hooker at 15,700.

ATLAS MAKERS STEAL INFORMATION from each other—to the extent that most commercial map publishers today include a fictional "trap street" or two on their urban maps in order to catch their thieving competitors out. In the mid-19th century, physical information about western North America was scarce, and publishers had to make a living. And so it was that Douglas's mountains, first published in an 1829 botanical document written in Latin, became the dominant trap streets of 19th century cartography. They remained the highest points on any map of British North America for almost three-quarters of a century, and so became the siren call for Canadian mountaineering exploration. These giants in the Rockies *had* to exist, for by the turn of the 20th century every atlas and geography book showed them as existing... somewhere.

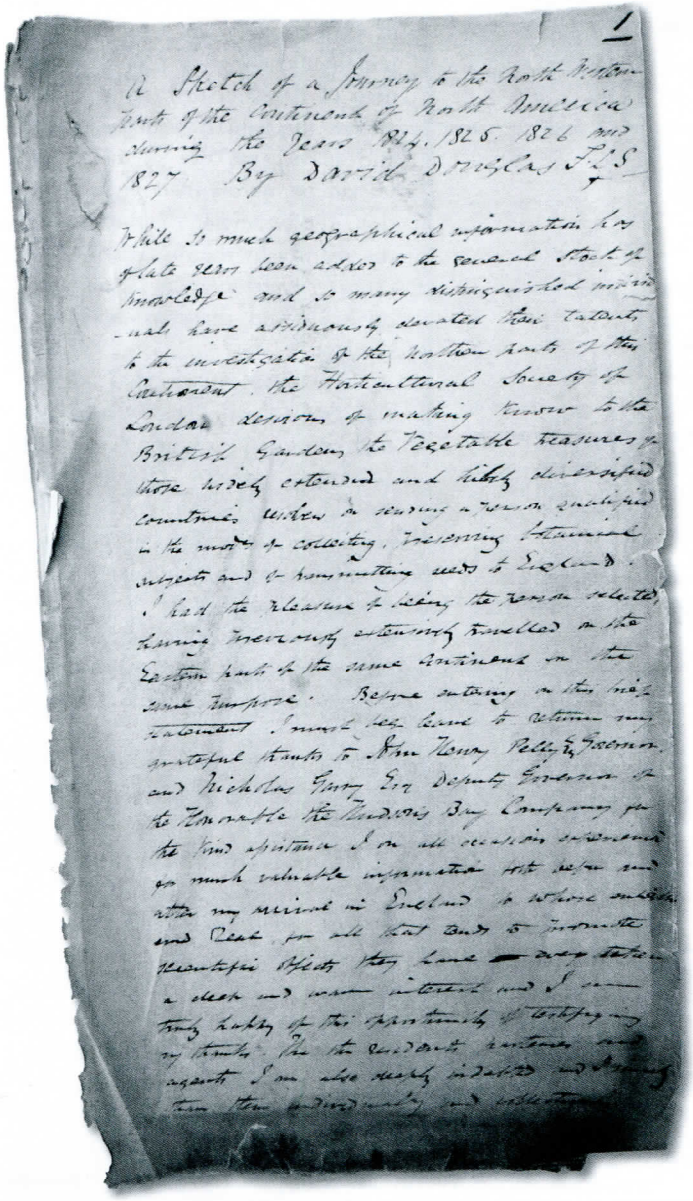
The problem was that nobody else had actually seen them. "A high mountain," wrote Arthur P. Coleman, professor of geology at the University of Toronto, "is always seductive. A mountain with a mystery is doubly so.... When I studied the atlas and saw Mount Brown and Mount Hooker, the highest points in the Rockies, standing on each side of the Athabasca Pass, I longed to [find] them.... My eyes turned to them irresistibly whenever I looked at the map, and my mind was soon made up to visit and, if possible, climb them."

And in 1893, because of a map drawn for him by Chief Jonas of the Stoney Nation, Coleman did at last find them—found them, that is, to be "frauds." "That two commonplace mountains...should masquerade for generations as the highest points in North America," he wrote, "seems absurd.... How could any one, even a botanist like Douglas, make so monumental a blunder...?" Five years later, J. Norman Collie, the British scientist and famed mountaineer, retraced Coleman's steps and agreed. "[That] Douglas climbed a peak 17,000 feet high in an afternoon," wrote Collie, "is, of course, impossible." "[T]o Prof. Coleman belongs the credit of...settled accuracy."

Charitable writers have ever since sought ways of understanding this spectacular mountain deception as being, somehow, innocent. Jerry Auld's introspective *Hooker & Brown*

(2009), which attempts to understand the story at the level of character, and through the narrative possibilities of historical fiction, is the latest in a long line of Canadian mountain-history speculation. Everyone agrees that Douglas's miscalculation probably derived from a boiling-point error reported—but never actually found in the archives—by David Thompson in 1811, when the surveyor/mapmaker calculated the height of Athabasca Pass to be 11,000 feet, rather than the 5,751 feet we know it to be. But the least charitable moment came in 1927, on the centenary of Douglas's alleged ascent of Mount Brown, and it came from the most distinguished alpine historian, writer of the region's first mountaineering guidebook, and later president of the American Alpine Club, James Monroe Thorington.

David Douglas's 1828 narrative, *A Sketch of a Journey to the North-Western Parts of the Continent of America During the Years 1824, 1825, 1826, and 1827,* prepared for, but never submitted to, publisher John Murray. Housed in the archive of the Lindley Library of the Royal Horticultural Society, London, UK. Photo: Zac Robinson



A Sketch of a Journey to the North Western
Parts of the Continent of North America
during the Years 1824. 1825. 1826 and
1827 By David Douglas F.L.S.

While so much geographical information has
of late been added to the general stock of
knowledge and so many distinguished minds
have assiduously devoted their talents
to the investigation of the northern parts of the
Continent, the Horticultural Society of
London desirous of making known to the
British Gardens the vegetable treasures of
those widely extended and highly diversified
countries, wishes to secure a person qualified
in the mode of collecting, preserving Botanical
subjects and of transmitting seeds to England.
I had the pleasure of being the person selected,
having previously extensively travelled in the
Eastern parts of the same Continent on the
same purpose. Before entering on this
engagement I must beg leave to return my
grateful thanks to John Henry Pelly Esqr.
and Nicholas Garry Esq Deputy Governor of
the Honorable the Hudsons Bay Company for
the kind assistance I on all occasions experienced
in much valuable information both upon and
after my arrival in England to whose exertions
and Care on all that ends to promote
the enterprise affords they have a deep debtor
a steady and warm interest and I am
truly happy of this opportunity of testifying my
my thanks for the constant attention and
assistance I on also deeply indebted and
from the [illegible]

After making a trip to England with the express purpose of comparing Douglas's original field notes—a hefty ledger of 131 pages, with entries covering the entire 1824-27 expedition—with the shorter prepared, but never submitted, manuscript, Thorington questioned whether Douglas actually reached the top of Mount Brown at all. A trip up the mountain with Conrad Kain in the summer of 1924 confirmed Thorington's suspicion. The altitudes, while grossly exaggerated, were not where the deception lay, Thorington concluded. Douglas always had trouble with altitudes, he noted, and fur-trade records indicated a long-standing tradition of height in the region. Everyone believed the mountains in the area were somewhere between 16,000 and 18,000 feet high. For Thorington, the deception was Douglas's claim of an ascent.

In his field notes, Douglas didn't name or attribute elevations to Brown or Hooker. These inventions, Thorington discovered, were created later in England in the shorter manuscript prepared for John Murray. Furthermore, in his field notes, Douglas described the view by saying "[n]othing, as far as the eye could perceive, but mountains such as I was on, and *many higher* [our emphasis]." The latter part of sentence is dropped in the Murray document and replaced with "the view from the summit" and "the highest yet known in the Northern Continent of America." In fact, the only suggestion in the field notes that perhaps puts Douglas on the actual summit of Mount Brown is a sentence that reads "the ascent took me five hours; descending only one a quarter"—and this is assuming, of course, that Douglas's use of the word "ascent" implies actually getting to the top. It's a big assumption for 1827. Again, in Douglas's day, mountaineering as sport didn't exist. And so it is difficult to say with certainty where exactly Douglas was standing when, in his field notes, he wrote as follows: "I *remained* [our emphasis] 20 minutes, my Thermometer standing at 18°; and night closing fast in on me and no means of fire, I was reluctantly forced to descend."

High on Mount Brown, Douglas's field notes in hand, Thorington could make little sense of the actual terrain in relation to the notes. The steeper cliffs near the top, for instance—terrain that would challenge anyone wearing snowshoes, as Douglas was—aren't mentioned at all. Moreover, Douglas's time of five hours hardly jived with the realities of spring conditions and snow. Travel at that time of year is just not that fast during the afternoon. Lower on the mountain, Douglas complained about "sinking on many occasions to the middle."

It was these details and others that led Thorington to suggest that, if we're to take the field notes at face value, Douglas likely "reached the snow plateau on the southern shoulder"; and that "it should not be forgotten that this was a time in mountaineering history when many a man 'climbed' a mountain without attaining the very summit. It was only necessary that one should reach a considerable height." Thorington's conclusions were published in his *The Glittering Mountains of Canada* (1925) and, again, in the 1926-1927 *CAJ*. But to fully understand the real story of mounts Brown and Hooker, as fragmentary and uncertain it remained, the historian challenged the

CAJ's readership to simply "remember the man who created it a hundred years ago."

Arthur O. Wheeler, the obstinate and fiery long-time director of the Alpine Club of Canada, wanted none of it, and a heated debate ensued for years between the two titans in the journal. Looking back on the exchange, writer/climber Bruce Fairley, in his wonderful *Canadian Mountaineering Anthology* (1994), surmised that Wheeler "simply could not conceive that so famous an explorer and scientist [Douglas] could simply have fabricated the details of his historic climb out of whole cloth." If Fairley's right, Wheeler missed Thorington's point—but it also shows that Wheeler knew little about David Douglas himself. Ironically, this is no small part of the Brown-Hooker problem.

Contemporary mountaineering writers have largely disregarded or misread Thorington's thesis. And they've all imagined Douglas in contexts befitting only what now seems to be the standard stock-in-trade creation myth of North American mountaineering. For instance, in both Andy Selters' *Ways to the Sky* (2004) and Chic Scott's *Pushing the Limits* (2000), attention is given to Douglas's exaggerated heights, but his summit achievement is taken for granted. Douglas is refashioned as both a great man of science—a "botanist-explorer," writes Selters—and an actual climber. "His elation and joy upon reaching the summit," says Scott, "can still be understood by mountaineers today."

In *Climbing in North America* (1976), Chris Jones goes further to claim that Douglas "does not give us science, botany, or geography, but he has stated what makes a mountaineer: a person who, without qualification, *desires* to climb peaks. We see in him the archetypal mountaineer." Jones continued to write that "if we understand what it was about those wintery peaks at Athabasca Pass that drew him to them, we have a grasp of mountaineering." Here, Douglas has been wholly remade as not only a climber—"he was our first mountaineer"—but as one of early mountaineering's exemplary figures, a fantastical sort of George Mallory *a la coureur de bois*.

To Douglas now goes the hefty honour of establishing mountaineering culture itself in Canada, or so any keen scrambler might interpret from the summit register atop Mount Brown. A note written by Robert W. Sandford, the author of *The Canadian Alps* (1990), which was taken to the top by a group of Jasper park officials in 2002, reads: "On this, the 175th anniversary of David Douglas' ascent, our expedition aims to commemorate the importance of... the role David Douglas played in the creation of this country's mountaineering culture."

TO TAKE THORINGTON'S CHALLENGE seriously is to consider Douglas in the context of his place and time. And to do so perhaps tells us more about the exclusive class-based world of Victorian science than it does about an emergent mountain culture in North America. Douglas was not ahead of his time, but rather a sad product of it. And if May 1, 1827, was a foundational moment for Canadian mountaineering, a serious appraisal that puts geography, literature and history in direct conversation with one another is necessary. It's almost certain that Douglas did not climb to the summit of Mount Brown. It is probable, however, that he ascended to a highpoint somewhere on the mountain's long, meandering southeast ridge just above that point, perhaps, where Wheeler and his Interprovincial Boundary Survey team would build their camera station 93 years later. An old bolt and a cairn still mark the spot where Wheeler measured and Douglas mused. But "fraud" is too strong a word for that complex process of botanical, geographic and literary intermingling that put Douglas's spectacular mismeasurement into the history books.

In a sport where the false claim has occasioned a special fascination among writers and readers (consider the whole Robson saga, for example, or Fredrick Cook's mendacious account of a first ascent on Mount McKinley) the Brown-Hooker problem fails to rise to the level of fraudulent deception. Here's why. While Douglas's claim puts him squarely on the summit of the highest point on the continent, it has little to do with mountaineering achievement, and even less to do with sensationalism. Thorington was mistaken to conclude that "the creation of Mt. Brown and Mt. Hooker and their altitudes... were introduced for purposes of personal publicity." An examination of the *entirety* of Douglas's two hand-written texts—the 131-page field notes and the 56-page manuscript—tells a different story. Murray awarded Douglas the contract because he presumed the collector would confine himself to the narrative portions of his field notes: colourful, day-to-day accounts of expedition travel interlaced with descriptions of scenery, and amusing or adventurous anecdotes, dangerous encounters with wild animals, equally dangerous encounters with stereotypically wild Indians. And in fact Douglas's field notes are stuffed full of that kind of narrative material—stories of the kind that a travel publisher like Murray and his reading public yearned for. But what remains of Douglas's unhappy, and incomplete, *Sketch of a Journey...* proves that Douglas had no intention of writing that popular, sensational travel memoir that Murray thought he had commissioned. In fact, those anecdotes that could have formed the basis for the book Murray wanted—a bear shooting incident, an encounter with scary "Indians", and the like—are actually removed from Douglas's book attempt. In their place remain the sullen outlines of stories Douglas did not want to have to tell, some dry attempts at professional botanical classification and an echoing homage to his scientific betters, Brown and Hooker, lions of a community into which he could never fully ascend.

Beyond the legacy of two chimeric mountain-giants, David Douglas is best known for another taxonomic legacy: the "sugar pine" tree he found along the Columbia. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Douglas's sugar pine also resonates through history as a story of failed definition and mismeasurement. It is now known, again wrongly, as the Douglas Fir.

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 too many books on the subject.