

# A Climber's Guide

By Zac Robinson and Stephen Slemon

GUIDEBOOK AUTHORS: THE UNSUNG HEROES OF MOUNTAINEERING LITERATURE. A HISTORIAN AND A LITERARY SCHOLAR TRACK THE EVOLUTION OF GUIDEBOOK WRITING IN THE CANADIAN ROCKIES, AND PROFILE THE CLIMBER WHO IS NOW PRODUCING THE MOST COMPREHENSIVE SERIES THE REGION HAS EVER SEEN. **MEET DAVE JONES.**

Dave Jones could have spent his writing life documenting nothing other than his own astonishing climbing achievements. In 1974, he and his partner came to within 500 metres of Makalu's summit – by the hardest route yet to be attempted on that mountain. That “failure,” on the world's fifth-highest peak, made him the first Canadian ever to climb above 8,000 metres. In 1977, Jones and four friends completed the first ascent of Mount Logan's long and difficult Warbler Ridge: a 27-day snow-and-ice epic that has yet to be repeated. In 1981, if not for a sudden change in weather that hit him high above the South Col, Jones would have become the first Canadian to climb Mount Everest.

*“At once the advisor, the archivist, the photographer, the scribe and the visionary, the truly great guidebook writer assumes an almost unimaginable task, one that may be unequalled in the wider canon of mountaineering literature.”*

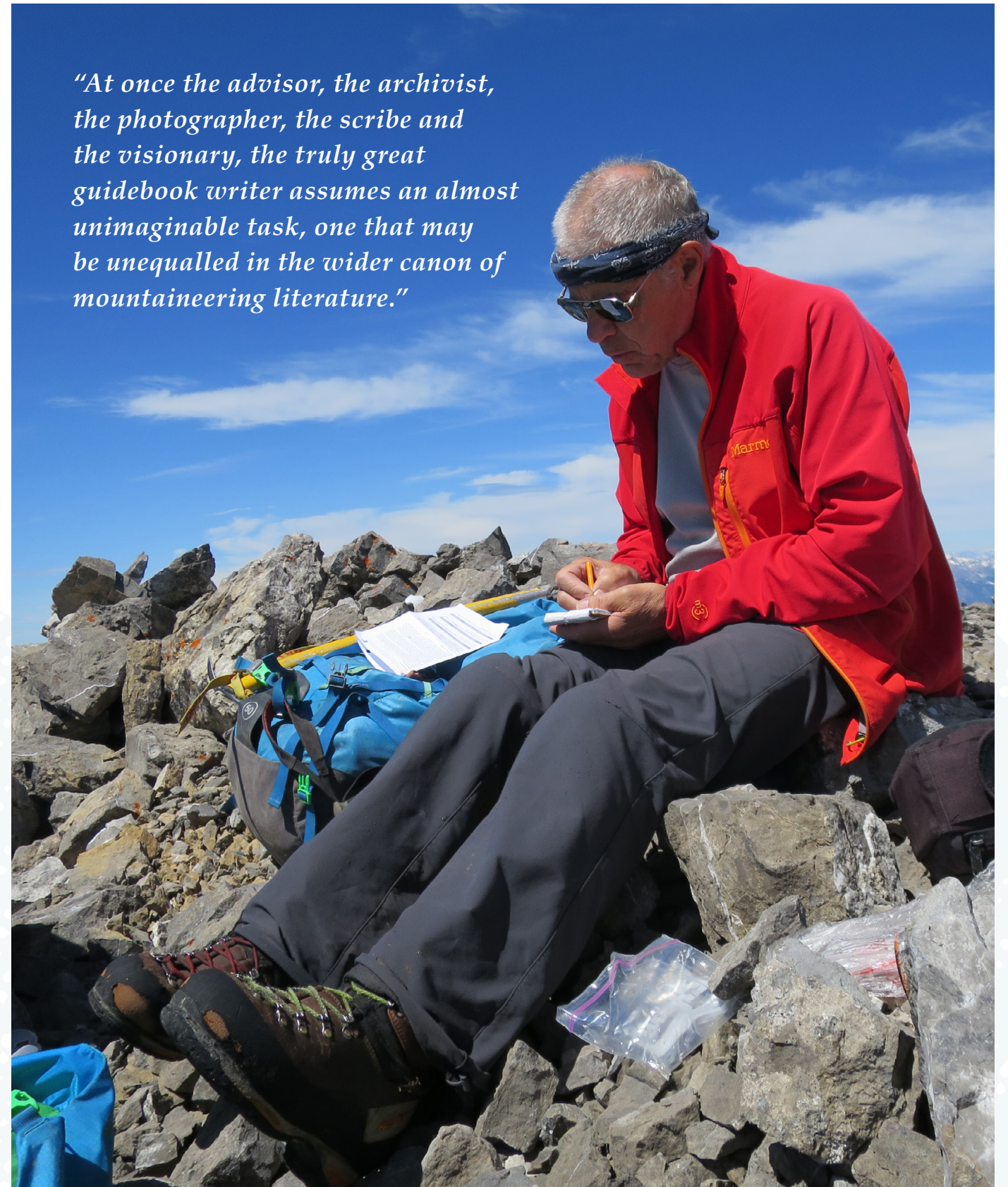


Photo: Tyler Parker



And those are just a very few of the achievements the mountaineering world has actually *noticed*. Since the 1960s, Dave Jones has been putting up new routes throughout western Canada, from the Rockies to the Coast Ranges to the great northern mountains of the Saint Elias: nearly a hundred first ascents of unclimbed peaks, over a hundred new routes on other mountains, and maybe 250 more sport-climbing routes across southern British Columbia. Last season alone, Jones, now in his 68th year, climbed 82 peaks he *hadn't* yet climbed, logged 109,000 metres of vertical and thrashed his way over 1,400 kilometres cross-country.

"If you've climbed just about anywhere in British Columbia," wrote Geoff Powter in 2012, "chances are pretty good that you are following in David Jones' footsteps... You've probably clipped his bolts, ... followed lines first dreamt of and then climbed by Jones, ... and walked a trail ... that Jones cut."

And yet, Powter continues, "you won't hear that from him."

"I don't feel very comfortable with public recognition," Jones said in a recent interview, following his reluctant acceptance of the 2016 Banff Mountain Film and Book Festival's prestigious Summit of Excellence Award. "I prefer to fly under the radar," he laughs. "If you are present in the mountains, if you're not worried about all the world's noise and the nonsense, mountains give you something you would otherwise never receive." That "something other" – what the mountaineering expe-

rience can be when it's not about you – is at the heart of Jones' meticulous approach to alpinism. It's why Dave Jones does write mountaineering literature, but writes it *otherwise*.

Jones is a guidebook author. Best known for *Selkirks South* (2001), *Selkirks North* (2004) and *Rogers Pass Alpine Guide* (2012), all outstanding guidebooks that together lay out more than 1,200 alpine climbing routes in the Columbias, Jones has recently begun the monumental task of updating the classic, comprehensive guidebooks to the Canadian Rockies. And in taking on the task, Jones is not just making practical mountaineering "literature." He's shouldering the responsibility for maintaining and extending a climbing register nearly a century in the making.

The first comprehensive guidebook for the Rockies was printed in 1921, a labour of love by two Philadelphians whose passion for the Canadian high alpine led them to multiple seasons in the company of Edward Feuz and Conrad Kain, the region's most famous alpine guides. Howard Palmer and J. Monroe Thorington's *A Climber's Guide to the Rocky Mountains of Canada*, with its pocketbook format, maroon cloth covers and rounded corners, was, according to one contemporary reviewer, "a work of consummate research," "a boon to climbers for years to come," and "in all probability, the basis of all similar efforts in the future." The small guidebook was praiseworthy for its novelty, its concision, its "splendid arrangement," and its "accurate information" about Rockies mountaineering achievements. It was equally

notable, in retrospect, for its capacity to look forward. Its 1921 frontispiece featured an alluring picture of Mount Alberta from the southwest. The caption below read: "A formidable unclimbed peak of the range."

Subsequent editions of the *Climber's Guide* were issued in 1930, 1940 and 1943, each slightly thicker than the last, each keeping pace with the region's new climbs. Following the death of Palmer in 1944, Thorington pressed on alone and produced a revised guide in 1953. In 1966, Thorington, now in his seventieth year, collaborated with William L. (Bill) Putnam, an energetic television broadcaster and member of the Lowell family of Massachusetts, to bring out the blue-covered sixth edition, now including "routes on all named peaks above 9,000 feet and every unnamed peak above 10,000 feet, plus lower summits when of mountaineering importance." Putnam would carry the series forward into the 1970s, dividing the guide into two volumes: the *Climber's Guide to the Rocky Mountains of Canada – South* (1973), with the Calgarian Glen Boles, and the *Climber's Guide to the Rocky Mountains of Canada – North* (1974), with Americans Robert Kruszyzna and Chris Jones. "Rockies South," as it came to be called, was considerably expanded and revised one last time in 1979, a treatment given to "Rockies North" in 1985.

Now long out of print, these were the last comprehensive guidebooks for the region to be published. Sean Dougherty's popular *Selected Alpine Climbs in the Canadian Rockies* (1991) was the go-to guide in the 1990s, but determining which peaks and routes had been

climbed – and which hadn't – became increasingly difficult, even with the advent of the Internet. Accurate and complete sources of information simply have not existed. Until now.

*Rockies Central*, Dave Jones' first installment in a new four-volume set of the *Climber's Guide to the Rocky Mountains of Canada*, hit the shelves in 2015, and if that first volume is any indication, Jones' series will be far more than merely a "revised" edition. Jones' methodology for guidebook writing is as dizzying as his approach to climbing itself. He's a details man – the routes, the names, the numbers, the elevations, the history, the geology – and he pursues them all with the same dogged devotion that he gives to climbing the peaks themselves. It's all "part of the process," Jones explains, with an air of seriousness. "I set down a framework that lists every peak over 2,600 metres – all of them, climbed or unclimbed, named or unnamed. I write a description for each peak: its location, its height, its features, its history and so on. And then – has it been climbed? Where? When? By who? Is the climbing good? I can't tell you the number of days I've spent going through old summit registers in the Whyte Museum's archive or with the old reports from the Alpine Club of Canada's camps. I lean on the past guidebooks for this information too, but all the descriptions have to be double-checked and rewritten. Everything needs to be referenced with a map – and even better, checked in the real world. Does the description make sense? Is it right? Does the picture do it justice? It's surprising the errors that you find!"

For *Rockies Central*, Jones climbed a staggering 176 mountains – just, he chuckles, "to get the right pictures." Jones hasn't yet tallied up the peaks he's climbed in pursuit of *Rockies West*, the next in the series, expected out this fall, but he guesses it will be close to 200.

That kind of effort shows that those who aspire to exceptional guidebook writing – Palmer, Thorington, Putnam, Boles, Kruszyzna, Chris Jones, Dougherty, Dave Jones – have to possess more than just advanced climbing competence, superior backcountry know-how, deep observational capacity, technical skill in writing, photography and page layout, a near-fanatical respect for history and a calculating eye to future objectives. They also have to possess that other great attribute captured in the first two words of the epigraph to the Palmer and Thorington 1921 edition of the *Climber's Guide*, taken from Robert Louis Stevenson: the attribute of "perpetual devotion."

At once the advisor, the archivist, the photographer, the scribe and the visionary, the truly great guidebook writer assumes an almost unimaginable task, one that may be unequalled in the wider canon of mountaineering literature. In the competent, organized presentation of accurate, genuinely usable detail, guidebook writers open a door into a wider world that we don't just have to imagine. They carry us safely beyond what we might have thought possible for ourselves. And then they carry us home. ▲

"If you are present in the mountains, if you're not worried about all the world's noise and the nonsense, mountains give you something you would otherwise never receive."

- Dave Jones

