

STEPHEN SLEMON HAS BEEN A PROFESSOR in the Department of English & Film Studies since 1988. His research and teaching interests include mountaineering literature and culture. He is actively involved with the U of A's recently-launched Canadian Mountain Studies Initiative, which brings together researchers from four Faculties: Arts; Agriculture, Life & Environmental Sciences; Physical Education & Recreation; and Science.

Q: How did your interest in mountains start?

A: For me it began with being a student of postcolonial literatures, and especially of literatures of the Indian subcontinent. I got pretty interested in some of the mountaineering narratives, for example, that would talk about the great imperial climbing expeditions, and in the representation of Sherpa communities.

The way I got into mountaineering actually came out of teaching a course in Commonwealth literature years ago, and it was a student that got me into it. I did what I now realize is a very easy rock climb with him. The first step that we took after we climbed up was over a ridge and onto a wall, and it was 1,000 feet down. I looked down, and I looked up, and I thought "this is thrilling." I was hooked after that. That's when I started to ask around and discovered that in Edmonton, climbers are everywhere.

Q: Where do you climb?

A: There is a huge world of wilderness out there in the Rockies. We are so lucky to live so close to such fabulous mountains. I could climb for several lifetimes and not even begin to scratch the surface of what's out there.

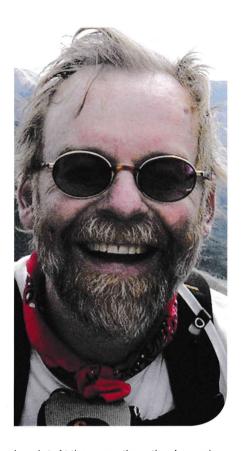
Q: How did the Canadian Mountain Studies Initiative come about?

A: In the early part of 2009, we started to put out feelers as to who was doing mountain studies and we quickly amassed about 20 professors. We put them in a room and discovered that the university already amassed a world-class cadre of scholars in mountain studies, but we were actually witnessing the birth of a new discipline in the moment of this happening. We really wanted students to be involved in this, and we really thought that this had to take place in conjunction with community partners.

We think that mountain studies could be as central a part of this university's understanding of itself as anything else. Our vision is that you could do an undergraduate degree, a BSc or a BA, in mountain studies, and it would be radically interdisciplinary. This is really different, and it's a thrilling change to be witnessing.

Q: Why are people so drawn to the mountains?

A: One of the reasons is a very negative reason: they are among the last of the real places of wilderness. There are not many places now where you can be absolutely away from that human



imprint. At the same time, they're under threat. Climate change is a real issue.

More than that, there are people who live in the mountains and then people who go to the mountains, and there's a very interesting human history that's caught up within that.

Beyond that, the "wow" factor of mountains just doesn't go away. There's something about getting up and moving in mountains that really wakes you up and you think "I've never been so alive. I just want to do this as much as I can. I never want to *not* do this." That's how I feel.

