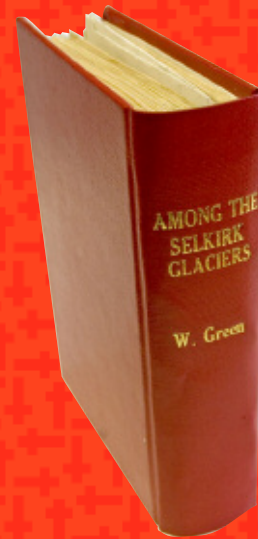




Bryon Harmon's photo on Mt Resplendent, of Alpine Club of Canada participants at a camp held around Mt Robson, early 20th century.



Divine Ascension

The birth of North American mountain sport

By Rob Buchanan

The tea-sipping parson jams his knees into the snow as a loud swishing noise tears through the air. Glancing beneath his feet, he sees the whole slope crack and start down the valley in one huge avalanche. Massive blocks of consolidated snow thunder down the glacier. The Reverend William Spotswood Green feels his entire weight hang on the hemp rope.

His partner and cousin, Reverend Henry Swanzy, tethered to the upper rope end and clutching his snow-anchored ice axe, holds Green fast. Getting what grip he can with toes, knees and ice axe, and Swanzy hauling on the rope, Green quickly gains safer ground. Soon after, standing side by side, the two reverends watch the cloud of snow fill the abyss 2000 metres below. It is obvious this route of descent is “manifestly impractical,” they would later write. There is no choice now. They must retrace their steps to the curved summit of 3170m Mount Bonney and go down by the same dangerous route they had ascended.

Shaken and hungry, having eaten nothing for five hours, Green searches his pockets. He finds a small packet of tea and one crumpled cigarette. Swanzy eats the tea and Green smokes the cigarette. Feeling their nerves in a more reliable condition, they commence the descent of this Selkirk giant.

Until the epic wanderings of Green and Swanzy, the riddle of the Selkirk Mountains had been unchallenged. “Of the peaks encircling and within sight of Glacier House some had names,” wrote Green. “These soon became familiar to us, but what lay beyond the ridges forming the sky-line, no one could give us the faintest idea.” The lure of solving the topographic puzzle of that rugged section of country lying immediately to the south of the Canadian Pacific Railway near Rogers Pass was too strong.

It was the summer of 1888. The devout clergymen had left their homes in Ireland and boarded a steamer for New York, bound for a six-week trip exploring the “purple peaks and silvery ice” of the Selkirk Mountains. The trip would inspire Green to write *Among the Selkirk Glaciers*, a journal and map of their adventures that ultimately spawned the birth of recreational mountaineering in North America.



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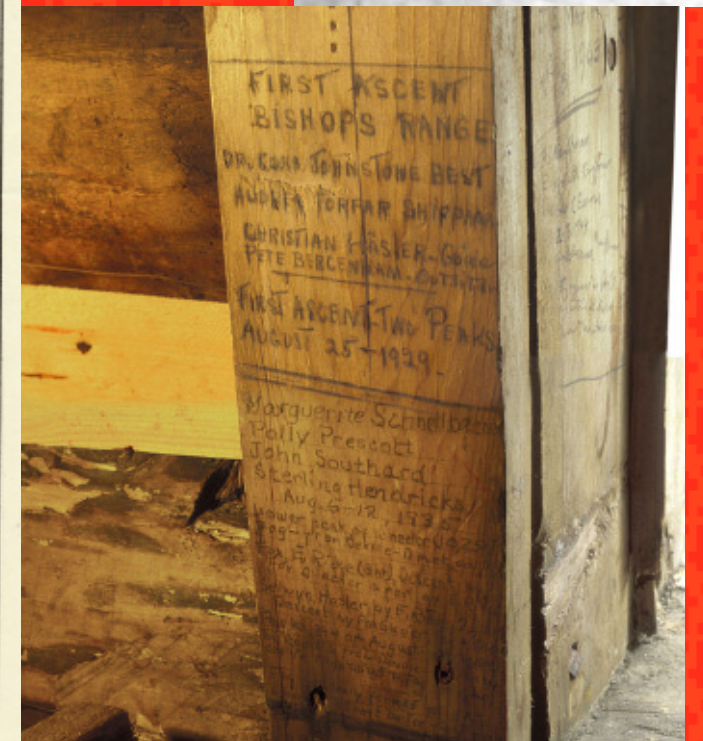
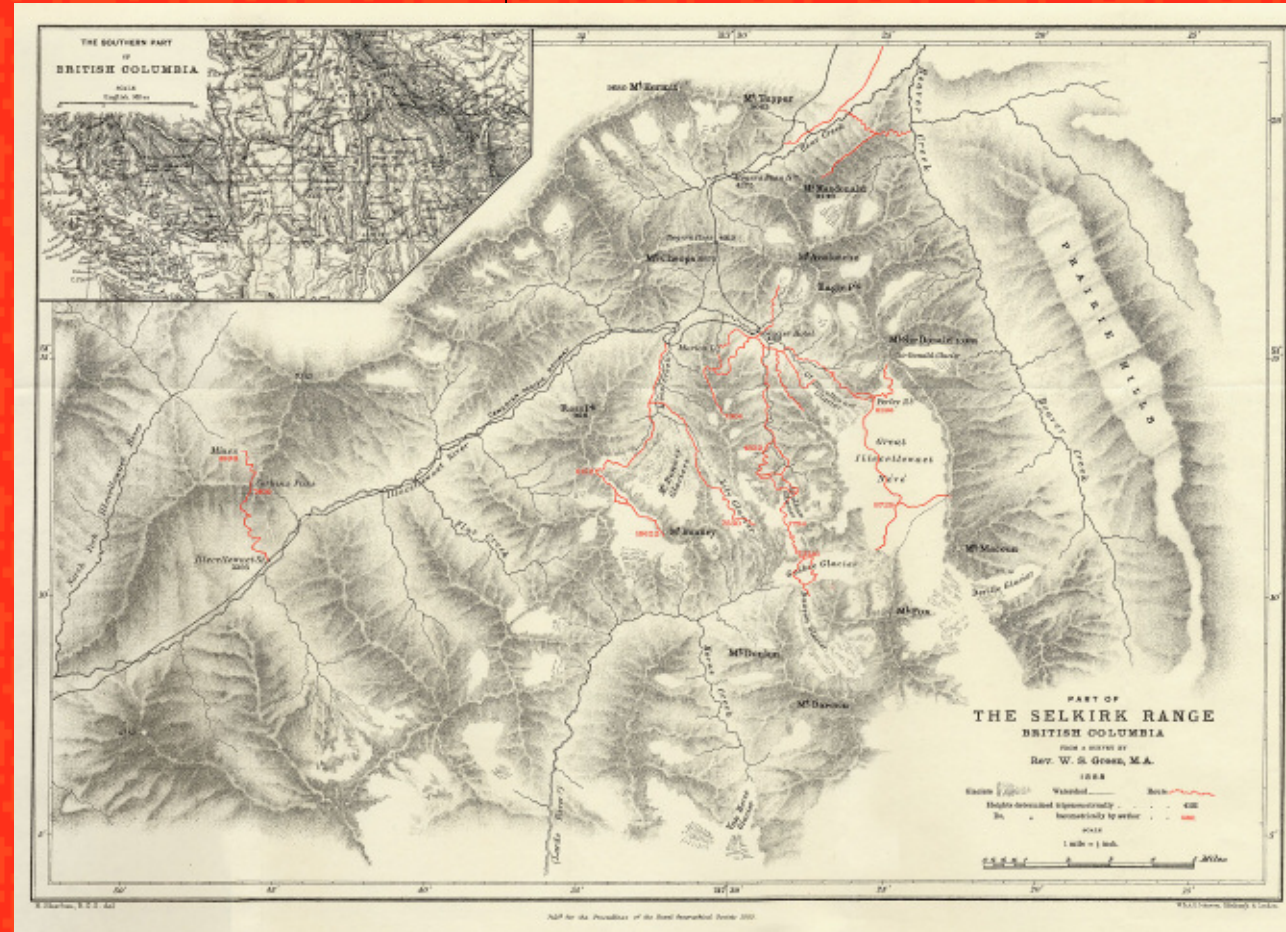


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**THUNDERSTORMS,
AVALANCHES,
CREVASSES, & SWOLLEN RIVERS**



Bryon Harmon's photo on Mt Resplendent, of Alpine Club of Canada participants at a camp held around Mt Robson, early 20th century.

THE VICTORIAN WORLD WAS AT THE APEX OF ITS IMPERIAL POWER AND THE MOST PRESTIGIOUS THING A VACATIONING MEMBER OF THE EMPIRE COULD DO WHILE TRAVELLING ABROAD WAS TO EXPLORE AND MAP AREAS PREVIOUSLY UNDISCOVERED.

Born in 1847, Reverend Green loved the outdoors. He had an innate climbing ability and exploited the flexibility of his profession to adventure widely. One of Green's greatest mountaineering accomplishments was an attempted first ascent of New Zealand's Aoraki-Mount Cook in the summer of 1882. Though Green and his two Swiss companions were forced back 50 metres from the summit, the attempt was so far ahead of its time it was afforded a permanent place in the alpine history of the southern Alps.

Four years later, the alpine paradise of the Selkirks "awakened my interest and caused visionary desires," wrote Green. By the autumn of 1887, the then 40-year-old Green enlisted his older cousin to join him on a trip to the Rogers Pass area to make first ascents of the Selkirks and name its great peaks. But this would be no simple vacation. The Victorian world was at the apex of its imperial power and the most prestigious thing a vacationing member of the Empire could do while travelling abroad was to explore and map areas previously undiscovered.

Fascinated by maps and map-making, Green borrowed surveying instruments from Britain's Royal Geographical Society and made exploring and mapping the spine of the Selkirks the chief cause of their existence. As well as the surveying equipment, they brought

two half-plate cameras, one quarter-plate camera and a small Stirn's detective camera. Sketchbooks and watercolours were added to the kit, as well as an unbleached calico stitched tent soaked in linseed oil — designed by the mountaineer Edward Whymper of Matterhorn fame — and two felt sleeping bags.

Before the plucky cousins disembarked at Glacier House, there was no record of a tourist ever entering the rugged landscape beyond the toe of the Illecillewaet Glacier. In fact, no one in North America had ever climbed a mountain for the sole sake of sport. Fur traders and railway surveyors had reached a few summits prior to 1888, but these explorers sought the easiest route through the mountains. Climbing them was not their ultimate goal. The reverends were taking the concept of adventure sport, already established in Europe, and bringing it to Canada.

Shortly after their arrival, the reverends undertook an ambitious reconnaissance of nearby valleys. The candidates for first ascents seemed endless. "Sharp jagged arêtes," wrote Green of the towering Mount Sir Donald, "meet it on either hand and suggest possibilities of ascent." And so they went to sleep with "that delightful uncertainty as to the future, which lends such charm to travel..."

Selkirk College

Hume Hotel



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Over the next six weeks, the Selkirks offered many attractions and difficulties. The ambitious pair plunged and slid and scrambled, “knocking a good deal more skin off our shins and tearing sundry reefs in our garments,” and mapped the following areas: Avalanche Crest, Perley Rock, Terminal Peak, the Illecillewaet Neve to the head of the Geikie Glacier, Asulkan Pass, the Lily Glacier, Mount Bonney, Corbin Pass, Mount Macdonald, Asulkan Pass to the base of the Geikie and Dawson Glaciers, and finally Mount Abbott. Thunderstorms, avalanches, crevasses and swollen rivers all contributed to impede their exploration.

But their surveys would lead to the completion of the first hiking and climbing map of the Rogers Pass area. This contribution was, of course, the proper way Victorian gentlemen ought to spend their summer vacations. Whenever possible they delivered Sunday evening service at Glacier House, where the singing of hymns was complemented by the roar of the glacier’s torrent.

The wild spirit of nature’s beauty played heavily in Green’s reasons for mountain adventure. Commenting on the happiness of

miners he met near Corbin Pass, he wrote “[Nature’s] beauty was the charm of their lives, and the language by which every tree, and plant, and rock, and torrent spoke to them had become so much of their existence, that life on the plain or in the centres of civilization would be for them the same as banishment.”

Reverend Green introduced North America to mountain exploration in all its adventurous possibilities. His book and its map became so highly respected that in 1891, the leading American climber of the day, Walter Wilcox, stopped at Glacier House and found it filled with adventure seekers “who were accustomed to gather every evening around a blazing fire and read selections from Green’s *Among the Selkirk Glaciers* just as our forefathers were wont to read a daily chapter from the Bible.” The religious connotations of this comment would have made the Reverend smile.

Rob Buchanan is a professional writer, photographer, graphic artist, and editorial cartoonist based in Revelstoke, BC.