

WHEN BOOKS WERE BOOKS

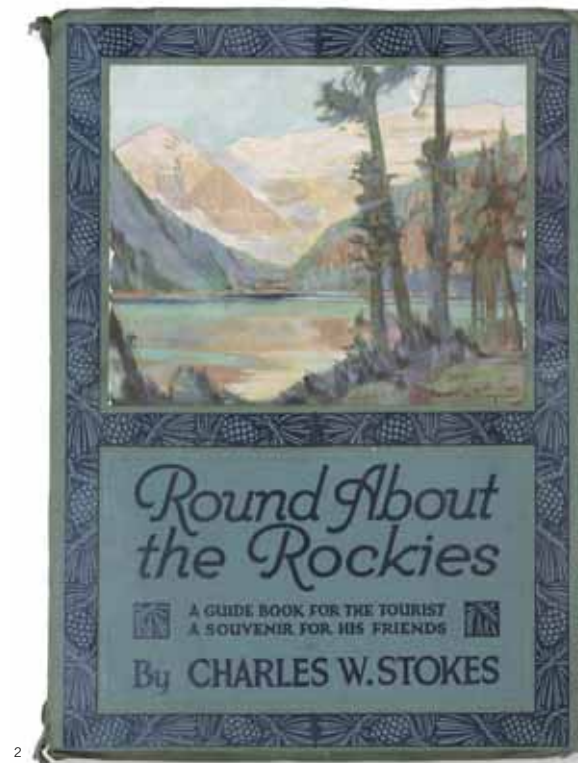
A trip back to the mountain culture publications of yesteryear

Story and photos by Chris Rowat

I FIRST MET Cameron Treleven at the 2007 Banff Mountain Book Festival. His small but overflowing table of books was stuck in the corner, lost amidst the numerous booths of current publishers and authors. The quantity of new books on display at the festival was overwhelming, and I browsed without much focus—until I found Cameron's booth. Unfamiliar books stared at me from simple wooden shelves. I was riveted by their appearance. They looked strange. The titles were long and formal. The placenames were familiar, but everything else about them was new. As I flipped through Cameron's 100 or so books on display, I realized I had arrived at the source. These were the original mountain books that contained the original mountain tales: first ascents, first explorations and the epic adventures that have inspired generations of dreamers to explore the mountains of the world.

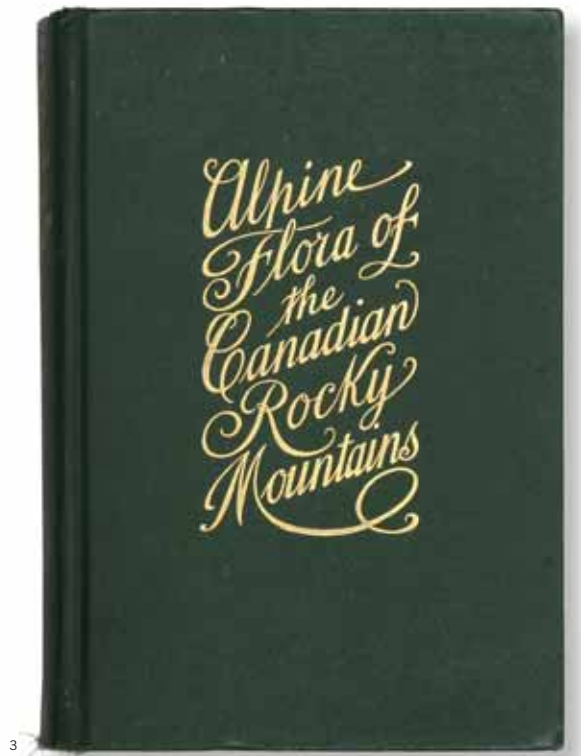


1. *The Challenge of the Mountains*, 1909, published by Canadian Pacific Railway. This series ran for about 10 years, promoting the Rockies, and the CPR hotel system, to North American and European travellers. Each cover featured a painting, many of which became emblematic of the CPR and Rockies' heyday. It is worth noting many of the cover paintings featured a female mountaineer, quite progressive for the time.



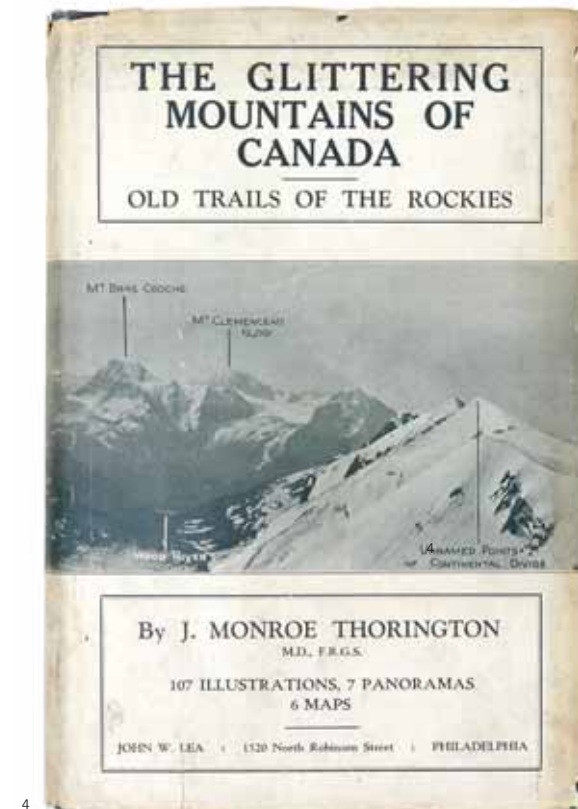
2. *Round About the Rockies*, Charles W. Stokes, 1923, 1st edition. The illustration is printed separately and glued onto the cover. Labour was cheap at the time, and this was an easy way to add value to the cover.
3. *Alpine Flora of the Canadian Rockies*, Stewardson Brown, 1907,

1st edition. A beautiful example of stylized lettering.
4. *The Glittering Mountains of Canada*, J. Monroe Thorington, 1925. The dust jacket has the identical text on the back cover, and the panoramic photo wraps around it, including the front and back flaps. Note that the text on the image is

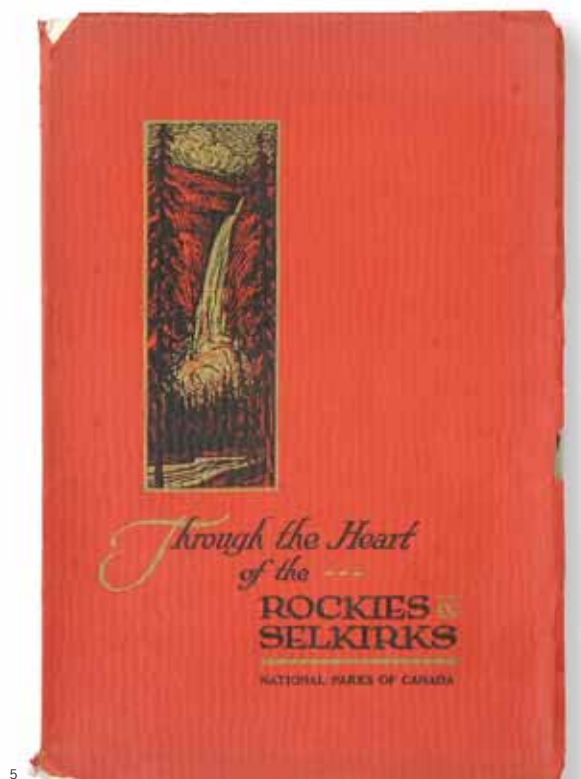


hand lettered. It is rare to find pre-World War II books with their dust jackets still intact. Dust jackets were often printed on poor quality paper and not intended to last.
5. *Through the Heart of the Rockies & Selkirks*, 1921, published by the Government of Canada, Department of the Interior, 1st edition. This

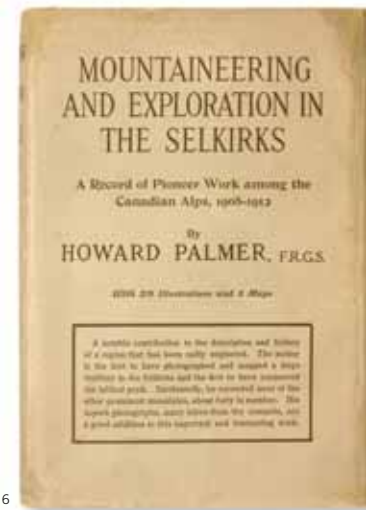
series of books promoted the National Park system, and included editions on Jasper and Kootenay Parks. A common but clever technique when printing with limited colours was to use the paper as an extra free colour in combination with the gold and black inks.



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6-7. Cover and spread from *Mountaineering and Exploration in the Selkirks*, Howard Palmer, 1914. The illustration on the left-hand page was printed separately from the text pages of the book using a process known as photogravure. The impression left by the edge of the bevelled photogravure plate can be seen around the photograph. The term "plate" still exists today, often in reference to a section of special images within a book. In this book, every plate is protected by a tissue insert, printed with the caption information. The tissue prevented the more acidic ink of the plate from offsetting onto the facing text page. These labour-intensive printing processes were once commonplace, but are now the domain of a handful of specialty craft printers scattered around the world.

8-9. *Summits & Secrets*, Kurt Diemberger, 1971, 1st edition. The autobiography of one of the world's foremost mountaineers. As technology and techniques evolved, so did the possibilities for book designers. Though not a landmark example, this book shows the dramatic change in style that accompanied technological progress. It is interesting to note that today, for the price of a nice mountain bike, you can buy software that has embedded within it the collective knowledge of 500 years of printing. What once employed legions of artisans and craftspeople now takes place on your laptop.

10. *The Selkirk Mountains: A Guide for Mountain Pilgrims and Climbers*, 1912. Normally attributed to A.O. Wheeler, the copyright page includes Elizabeth Parker.

11. *The Mountain World*, vol. 9, 1966-67, published by The Swiss Foundation for Alpine Research. This journal ran from 1953 to 1969 and covered mountaineering around the world.

12. *Where The Clouds Can Go: The Autobiography of Conrad Kain*, edited by J. Monroe Thorington, 1935, published by the American Alpine Club, 1st edition. This copy was owned by William S. Ladd, who was president of the AAC from 1929-31 and climbed with Kain. It also contains personal letters between Ladd and Kain. The book is worth \$500.

13. *Camping in the Canadian Rockies*, Walter Dwight Wilcox, 1896, 1st edition. One of the first books on the Rockies.

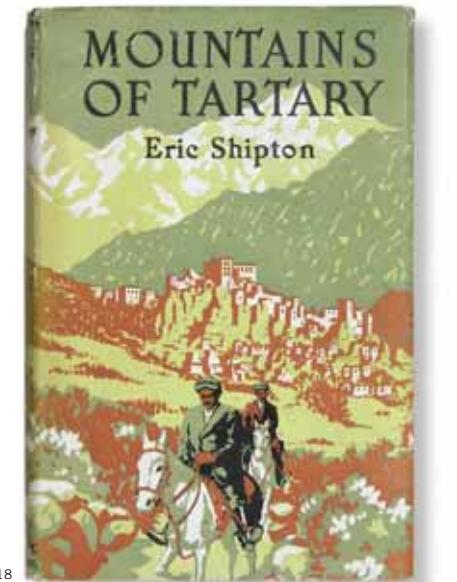
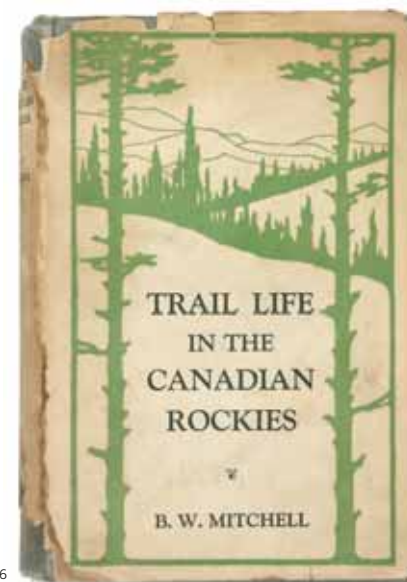
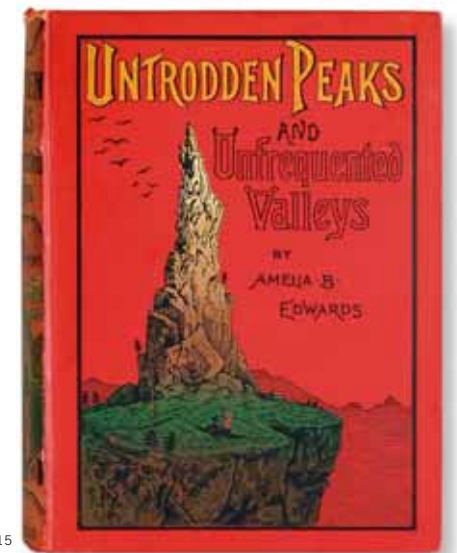
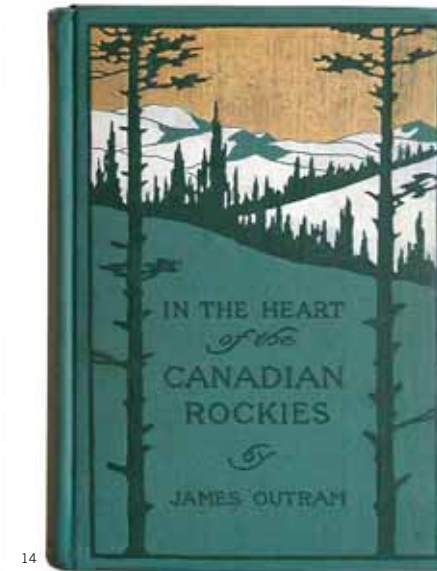
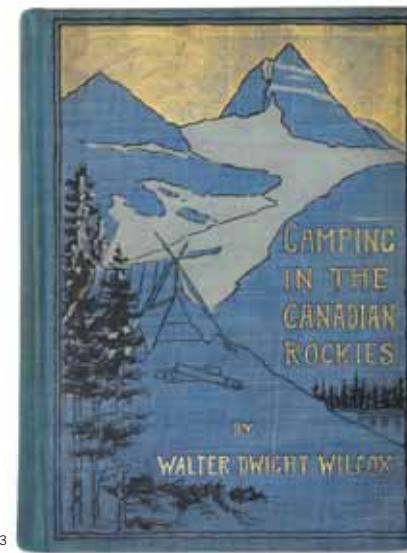
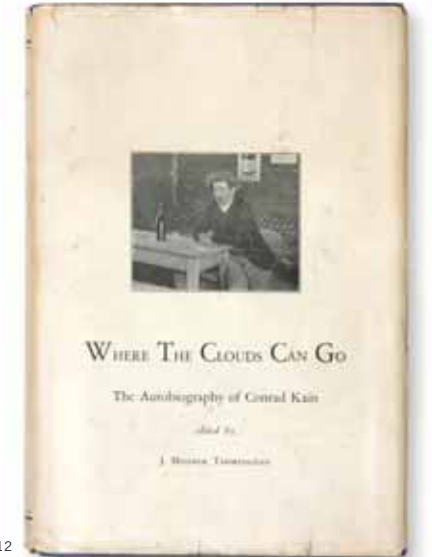
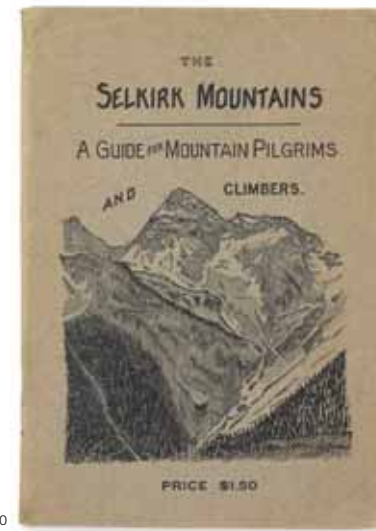
14. *In the Heart of the Canadian Rockies*, James Outram, 1905. Includes the first ascent of Mount Assiniboine. This book is a cornerstone of Canadian mountaineering publishing.

15. *Untrodden Peaks and Unfrequented Valleys*, Amelia B. Edwards, 1890 reprint. Originally published in 1870, this is a fine example of a Victorian-era cover. This kind of multicolour embossing was a popular technique at the time. Edwards was an early female traveller, adventurer, and Egyptologist who wrote numerous books about her exploits.

16. *Trail Life in the Canadian Rockies*, B.W. Mitchell, 1924, 1st edition. Interestingly, this cover reuses the same art from the cover of James Outram's book (fig. 14), almost 20 years later.

17. *Everest 1933*, Hugh Ruttledge, 1934, 1st edition. An early example of text being positioned over a photograph.

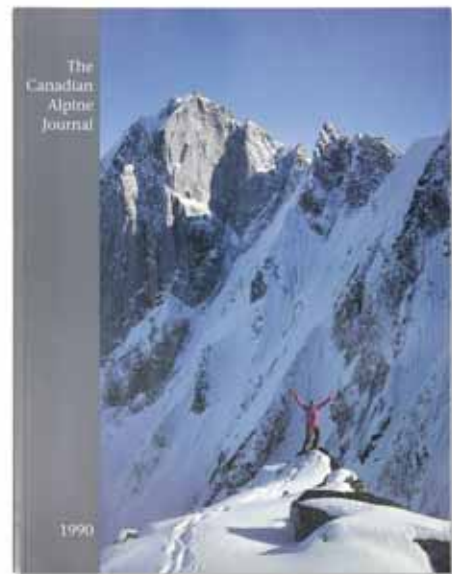
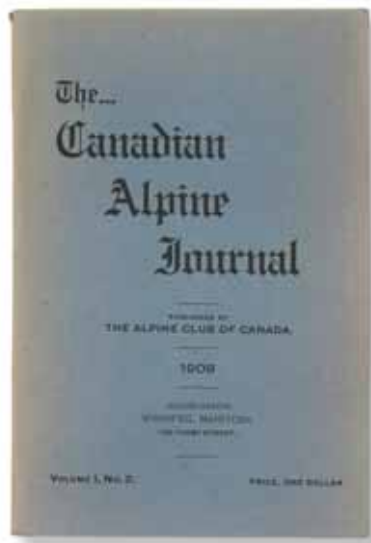
18. *Mountains of Tartary*, Eric Shipton, 1951, 1st edition. This is part of the Shipton/Tillman suite of 15 books and a beautiful example of an illustrated dust jacket printed in four solid colours.



On the surface, these old books look more or less like the books of today; they have pages, words and images. But after that they bear little resemblance. The typefaces are unfamiliar. The colours more muted. Some only use text on the cover, while others have intricate foil stampings depicting abstracted landscapes. There is little in the way of photography, but the few books with photos print them with Ansel Adams perfection. There are fascinating illustrations and engravings. In the era of desktop publishing and short-run, on-demand printing, these books are cultural treasures akin to long lost relics. And finding them is just as difficult.

Old books look the way they do partly because of what was technically feasible at the time. Text pages were printed "letterpress", with raised metal type, while photographs were printed "photogravure", with metal plates etched with acid. These two processes were radically different and hence were printed separately. That's why very old books have separate image pages or "plates", devoid of text, and sometimes on different paper. Over time, with the advances in printing technology, it became possible to combine words and images on the same page. Book designers were free to explore new layout possibilities: text beside images, text over images.





19–22. In print for over 100 years, and still going strong, these two editions of *The Canadian Alpine Journal*, separated by almost 80 years, show the evolution of an icon. Above: vol 1, no. 2, 1908. Note the different paper used for image pages. The smooth, shiny paper allowed for better printing of photos. This format lasted until 1970. Below: *The CAAJ*, 1990. With the evolution of mountaineering also came evolution in design. Words and images were easily woven together to tell the story in a way that wasn't possible 80 years previously. Cameron has a complete set of the *CAAJ*, from 1907 to today.

As you peruse Cameron's books, you can almost date them by how they look. It's an archaeological dig—Cameron is a trained archeologist—complete with the unique sensory experience that comes with handling old books: the worrisome sound of the spine cracking as you open it, the soft feel of the fragile paper, the musty smell of disintegrating paper lingering on your hands long after you've put the book down.

Why are we so fascinated with old things? Is it simple sentimental yearning? Is it holding a physical object that's 100 years old, perhaps the last of its kind? Or maybe reading the original book is like listening to the tale told for the first time, the voice of Shipton or Kain or Palmer speaking to us as if they were still alive. And by connecting with them, and with the past, we feel more in touch with the present. Whatever the reason, we will always need book hunters like Cameron Treleven. *For more information visit aquilabooks.com.* □

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