

A Passion for Wilderness:
Understanding the Mountain Travels of Mary T.S. Schäffer Warren, 1889-1939
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Less than one hundred and fifty years have passed since the Banff Hot Springs Reserve was founded in 1885 and much has changed in the Parks. Mary Schäffer, who first visited the Canadian Rockies in 1888, developed a passionate interest in the wilderness of the National Parks and laboured both to promote its beauty and to protect it from being violated. As a pioneer alpine tourist and Canadian Rocky Mountain conservationist, Schäffer's life and actions serve as an example of someone who both participated in the tourist industry and foresaw the coming destruction of the landscape in which she traveled. She saw the loss of wilderness that resulted from carelessness and ignorance of industry and tourism alike. Her actions in the mountain landscape were a product of her comprehension of its value and fragility.

First, a brief biography of Mary Schäffer. Mary Townsend Sharpless was born in Pennsylvania in 1861. As a young woman, Schäffer was encouraged to develop an amateur interest in natural sciences. In 1889 she travelled across Canada to visit the Canadian Rockies where friends, the Vauxes, were conducting research on the Illecillewaet glacier in British Columbia. This was Schäffer's first exposure to the mountains and it was also when she met her husband-to-be, Charles Schäffer. Following their marriage, the Schäffers travelled together to the Rockies in the summers of 1891-1903 and worked on a botanical catalogue of the plant life there. Charles Schäffer died in 1903 and in 1904 Mary Schäffer began her independent adventures in the Rockies.

In 1906, she completed and published the botanical catalogue Charles and she had started. In 1907, accompanied by two male guides, she and her friend Molly Adams travelled by horse-back and by foot for four months through what would become Banff and Jasper National

Parks and in 1908 made a similar trip, during which they “found” Chaba Imne, as the lake was called by the Stoney First Nations or what was later named Maligne Lake. In 1911, Schäffer published a book-length account of her mountain travels. In the same year, by request of the Geological Survey of Canada, Schäffer returned to Maligne Lake, this time by a northern route from Edmonton, to survey the lake itself. In addition to Old Indian Trails: Incidents of Camp and Trail Life, Covering Two Years’ Exploration through the Rocky Mountains of Canada, Schäffer also wrote and published numerous articles about her experiences, as well as short stories about the Rockies and a woman’s advice on mountain expeditions, making her a well-known literary and popular figure in the early twentieth century world of mountain literature.

Schäffer placed great value in the mountain landscape, both in its aesthetic magnificence and in its re-creative qualities, as she herself had experienced. This valuing she demonstrated in several ways. First, she specified for her travels a search for unexplored wilderness. In other words, from the beginning she placed great value in untouched nature. Second, in her writing she carefully described the destruction of the landscape she saw in her travels and who had caused it. While, contradictorily, she was blind to her own contribution to the destruction, she still left a record of the changing mountain landscape of which she was a part. Third, she actively pursued the creation, enlargement and maintenance of Jasper National Park, particularly the parts she had explored personally. In this way, her responses to the perceived coming destruction of the mountain landscape were varied, complex and often contradictory, and steadfast only in that they all resulted from her passion for the wilderness.

Schäffer’s expeditions in the first place depended on the existence of wilderness for her to explore. According to her writing, the advancement of civilization into the wilderness was the

impetus for her first ventures.¹ She sarcastically commented that at that time women were required to wait to see the “wilderness” until “there is a good trail cut, when the muskegs are nicely bridged” and then only then could they “solemnly [go] to see a point of interest which has been accentuated with dead camp fires, scraps of paper, tin cans, etc.”² Clearly, Schäffer’s desire was to see the landscape *before* this pollution began. At the beginning of Old Indian Trails, she declared that her real objective for her backcountry travel was to “delve into the heart of an untouched land, to travel where no human foot had trod before, to turn the unthumbed pages of an unread book.”³ Again on the outset of the second trip, her aim was to travel into “country as untried as we had yet seen.”⁴ Thus, passion and appreciation for the untouched wilderness were what induced Schäffer to venture as far into the mountain landscape as she did.

Schäffer’s untouched wilderness did include the First Nations people who had previously lived there, and at times she did recognize their presence. The title of her published travel diaries, Old Indian Trails, drew attention to the fact that wilderness was not uninhabited. Throughout her writing is evident her reliance on Aboriginal trails for guidance, for instance, a map provided by Samson Beaver aided her first trip to Maligne Lake—and Schäffer did not disguise this fact. However she also described the First Nations predicament as a “tragedy” wherein the “glamour of the Aborigine [was] departing”⁵ and thereby dismissed to a large extent any present role in the wilderness landscape for the First Nations (they were, afterall, *old* Indian trails) as well as any future role for the people.

¹ Schäffer, “Old Indian Trails: Expedition of 1907,” 16.

² Schäffer, “The Infinite Variety of the Canadian Rockies,” Rod and Gun in Canada, clipping, n.d., Mary Schäffer Fonds: Mary Schäffer Papers series, “Scrapbook—1905-1911,” WMCR M79/9B.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Schäffer, “Old Indian Trails: Expedition of 1908,” 80.

⁵ Schäffer, Lantern Slide Presentation, WMCR M79/16.

In her writing, Schäffer consciously made note of the destruction of her beloved wilderness. A record of the changing landscape is especially noticeable in the account of her 1911 trip to Maligne Lake. Presumably, this emphasis on destruction is the result of the writer viewing the change that had occurred over the passage of the few years since her last extensive travel through the area. This explanation seems especially pertinent since Schäffer published Old Indian Trails the same year as she wrote her account of the 1911 trip. Both excursions would have been fresh in her mind for comparison. However, this was far from the first time she had published her observations on the changing landscape. In her 1905 article on her trip to the Nakimu⁶ caves in what would become Revelstoke National Park she wrote “two days in that valley of beauty and wonder, and we were forced by circumstances to turn our footsteps to prosier paths. The Government, or some enterprising parties will soon see it is a place for the every hungry tourist, the trails will be too easy, the cave will be well guarded with iron rods and chains, the bloom will be brushed from the peach and there are two who are glad to have seen it still fresh and undiminished from the years of silence.”⁷ Already in 1905, she foresaw the damage the influx of tourism would bring.

What Schäffer produced was, in effect, an elegy to the mountains, a fatalistic lament to the unpreventable loss of a landscape. She ended Old Indian Trails with the remark “we realized that next time we came that way our horses would not have to swim for it, all would be made easy with trains and bridges; that the hideous march of progress, so awful to those who love the real wilderness, was sweeping rapidly over the land and would wipe out all trail troubles.”⁸ It is almost as if she was warning readers that they would be disappointed if they came to the

⁶ Also called the Deutschmann Caves.

⁷ Schäffer, Mary, “First Ladies to visit cave”, Revelstoke B.C. Thursday, clipping, 10 August 1905, Mary Schäffer Fonds: Mary Schäffer Papers series, “Scrapbook—1905-1911,” WMCR M79/9B.

⁸ Schäffer, “Old Indian Trails: Expedition of 1908,” 130.

mountains expecting to see the landscape they read about. In the first several paragraphs of “The 1911 Expedition to Maligne Lake,” Schäffer emphasized that when she had left in 1908 she expected change to come: “we said ‘Goodbye’ to it all, mile by mile, we knew it was forever—as we saw it in those days. Prospectors and surveyors had left their imprint every foot of the way, the dreaded change was bound to come, and come soon.”⁹ At the end of the article, she laments, “The wedge has been driven in; in another year the secret places would be secret no longer.”¹⁰ From Schäffer’s perspective in 1911, there was no hope for the protection of the wilderness.

Schäffer specifically blamed others for the changes in the landscape that she found. These changes were brought by tourists, by those looking for work in the mountains, and by the railway, which brought in both tourists and employment-seekers. In a chapter entitled “On the Search for Fortress Lake” in Old Indian Trails, Schäffer first worried that she and her companions were to blame for starting a forest fire and was later relieved to discover that a couple of traveling “timber-cruisers” were actually responsible.¹¹ Again at Mount Robson, she related her disgust for the “careless indifferent campers of other days” who had caused a lot of trees to be burnt.¹² Elsewhere, she wrote, “the story of the Invader of Silence could be read in the ubiquitous tomato and condensed-milk cans seen at intervals on the trail.”¹³ This litter could have been left by tourists or workers, or both.

A theme running throughout the Maligne Lake article is the destruction rendered by the introduction of the railway. Schäffer referred to the train as the “python” that “insinuated” itself

⁹ Schäffer, “The 1911 Expedition”, 132.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 152.

¹¹ Schäffer, “Old Indian Trails: Expedition of 1907,” 36-37.

¹² Schäffer, “Old Indian Trails: Expedition of 1908,” 122.

¹³ Schäffer, “The Valleys of the Saskatchewan with Horse and Camera,” The Bulletin of the Geographical Society of Philadelphia 5.2 (1907), clipping, Mary Schäffer Fonds: Mary Schäffer Papers series, “Scrapbook—1905-1911,” WMCR M79/9B.

into the landscape.¹⁴ These derogatory metaphors reveal her condemnation of the railroad as an entity bent upon penetrating the wilderness. During the time Schäffer traveled through Jasper on her way to Maligne Lake, and wrote the article about her experience, the CPR had already crossed the mountains to the west coast several decades earlier and the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway and the Canadian National Railway were both attempting to cross the mountains via Jasper. Consequently, destruction rendered by the railway—and by the people the railway would bring with it—weighed heavily on Schäffer’s mind.

Yet, at the same time that Schäffer was noting the destruction of the landscape that occurred throughout the time of her travels, she was creating destruction herself. First of all, her first introduction to the Rockies had been as a passenger of the CPR, the very python she disliked so strongly for “swallowing up” her “pet playgrounds.”¹⁵ Moreover, she herself had produced propaganda literature for the Minneapolis St. Paul and Sault Ste. Marie Railway Company. In addition, based on the evidence provided by her narratives, she took few precautions in ensuring that she and her companions did not commit similar crimes against the landscape to those she criticized others for committing. For instance, in the 1911 Maligne Lake narrative, after writing that “the only blemish” to the lake was a past forest fire, she created ‘blemishes’ with her fire pits, the glass from the vinegar bottle with which her surveying raft was christened, the raft itself, which was left behind at the lake upon the party’s departure, the raft remaining from her first visit to the lake and, in all likelihood, many other items she did not mention.¹⁶ A point she did relate but did not question was the fact that the government cut 35 miles worth of trail in

¹⁴ Schäffer, “The 1911 Expedition,” 132.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Schäffer, “The 1911 Expedition.”

anticipation of her visit.¹⁷ Throughout her writing, while she bemoaned the fact that the railway cuts a wide path and other mountain visitors carelessly start fires, she failed to realize that in navigating her way through the wild landscape she too was cutting a path causing changes. While some of these actions were necessary part of camping in the mountains, the point is that her travels were as destructive as were the travels of others, and she rarely chose to recognize this.

Schäffer took an interest in the creation and preservation of the mountainous Canadian National Parks. A 1907 article she wrote for The Bulletin of the Geographical Society of Philadelphia reads “The Canadian Government has included the vast area from the railroad to the Saskatchewan River in a great national park, wisely prohibiting hunting and fishing, thus saving to some extent the fast disappearing game.”¹⁸ She clearly believed that the inclusion of the land within a national park was for its protection. On May 12, 1910, Howard Douglas, the Commissioner of Dominion Parks, wrote Schäffer a letter including information regarding the parks “that [she] asked for.” Douglas also detailed efforts to hinder further building at Lake Louise and discussions about transportation infrastructure in the parks.¹⁹ Clearly, Schäffer had communicated to the commissioner her interest in the National Parks. Upon the return from her 1911 trip to survey Maligne Lake, Schäffer was interviewed by the Edmonton Evening Journal and went on record as being “indignant” about the government having radically reduced the size of Jasper Park, a reduction that excluded Maligne Lake from within its boundaries.²⁰ Finally, based solely on the contents of her scrapbook, Schäffer had a great deal of interest in the

¹⁷ Mary Schäffer, “Locating and Measuring Lake Maligne,” n.d. Mary Schäffer Fonds: Mary Schäffer Papers Series, “Original Manuscripts—[ca.1908]-1925,” WMCR M79/3.

¹⁸ Schäffer, “The Valleys of the Saskatchewan with Horse and Camera.”

¹⁹ Douglas, “Letter to Mary Schäffer.”

²⁰ “Philadelphia Woman Names New Mountain,” Evening Journal-Edmonton, clipping, 9 August 1911?, Mary Schäffer Fonds: Mary Schäffer Papers series, “Scrapbook—1905-1911,” WMCR M79/9B.

maintenance of Jasper National Park. She collected numerous newspaper clippings discussing its creation and continuation, including articles from the Toronto Globe, and Canadian Life and Resources that promoted Jasper National Park as “the mountain park on the line of the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway.”²¹

While Schäffer expressed her admiration of the landscape by encouraging others to visit and explore it, she also had misgivings about the results of a mass opening up of the mountains to economic exploitation. She realized that with the influx of prospectors, “timber-cruisers” and other tourists, the wild nature she set out to explore would be eliminated. Consequently, Schäffer’s passion for the mountain landscape and her concern about its loss prompted several reactions on her part. She created a body of knowledge recording the changes in the landscape, and she pushed for the development of Jasper National Park, a designation that would protect it to a large degree from the prospectors and timber cruisers and to a smaller degree from the tourists that would come later in the twentieth century.

Schäffer’s varied and often-contradictory responses to the very real threat of the disappearance of the wilderness was common among her contemporaries. Her passion for and awareness of the value of nature were far from new phenomena, as demonstrated by the American Romantics. Schäffer developed her passion for the landscape into an awareness of its destruction and protest against that destruction. Muir and the Sierra club also pushed the Romantic tradition past mere appreciation and towards the protection of the land. The contradiction of Schäffer’s own destructive behavior was a common thread in the conservation movement in the United States as well. Muir was accused of hypocritically participating in the forestry industry in his younger years while fighting the same industry later in his life. He

²¹ “Jasper Park” Canadian Life and Resources, clipping, January 1910, Mary Schäffer Fonds: Mary Schäffer Papers series, “Scrapbook—1905-1911,” WMCR M79/9B.

prioritized the need to preserve the wild and forested landscape over the need for lumber. Muir's colleague Gifford Pinchot started out his career in the National Forestry Commission as a conservationist but later caused a huge rift in the conservationist movement in the United States because of his prioritization of economical needs of the country over the aesthetic.²² These individuals chose to react to the potential contradictions in nature conservation in opposite ways.

Like Muir and Pinchot, Schäffer had to choose where she stood on the conservation issue. Muir could not reconcile industry with conservation, and Pinchot's efforts to do so caused major controversy among his associates. Schäffer came to the mountains as a tourist and gained an appreciation for the landscape as such. However, tourism was a large part of the problem in the destruction of the wilderness, as she sometimes recognized. Perhaps, however, in her efforts for the creation of the National Parks, she was reconciled to the tourist industry that would be active in the Parks merely because she knew all other industry would be prohibited. Perhaps tourism was to her the least of several evils that might be endured by the mountain landscape.

In conclusion, tracing Schäffer's roles in the mountain landscape reveals the complexity of her passion for nature and wilderness. She was brought up and taught to value nature by both Romantic and scientific communities and she demonstrated her love for it by being a part of the growing trend of mountain-exploring women. Her participation in and contribution to the tourist industry in the National Parks was a result of her love for the landscape. Yet, she was also aware of the destruction inherent in tourist exploitation as well as industrial exploitation. At times, she condemned the very tourist behaviour that she herself had exhibited. Her labour on behalf of the Parks, however contradictory, was her attempt to protect the landscape from irreversible destruction. The ambiguity and contradiction apparent in her words, actions and motivations is perhaps understandable considering she had the difficult task of reconciling the fact that tourists

²² Wolfe, *Son of the Wilderness*, 268-276.

like her were damaging the landscape, and that regardless of her appreciation of and passion for mountain wilderness, a growing tourist industry was inevitable.

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*WMCR abbreviation for Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies.

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