

Climbing Women: The Media View

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Mountaineering and rock climbing have traditionally been a male bastion. The legendary first ascents by Whymper of the Matterhorn, Hillary of Everest, and Harding of El Capitan, were all made by men. For over a century the world of the mountain climber was much like that of soldiers or explorers, a male-only stronghold. It was a place of male camaraderie and in an essential way, an arena for men to prove themselves. Conquering the mountain was a classic demonstration of masculinity. Though some women climbed even in the nineteenth century, they did so primarily with the assistance and direct supervision of males. As for most endeavors in the wider society, women were seen as too weak, both physically and mentally, to withstand the rigors of climbing. Women broke down when faced with the dangers and demands of the mountain environment. Men set the rope and broke the trail.

While in the mountains nearly as long as men, women initially had a clearly defined subordinate role. They were there to admire the men, and only on sufferance of (and with the assistance of) their male companions. This traditional arrangement, a masculine world where women were frail accessories, is manifest in the bulk of climbing literature. Recently, however, this image has begun to change. Women are now depicted as independent climbers, able to take care of themselves in the mountains, and on the rocks, indeed, they are even beginning to challenge their former male protectors in competitions.

This paper examined the evolving depiction of climbing women in various literary sources, roughly covering an extended century from 1870 to 1980. It examined traditional stereotypes and the occasional iconoclastic heroine to draw conclusions about the ways that women climbers were viewed. The paper also drew on other media representations, including documentary films, to suggest that the images of climbing women at any given point reflected not only the concerns of climbers, but also changing social roles prescribed for women generally during the same time period.