



AAC Publications

William Lowell Putnam III, 1924 – 2014

Ironically, Bill Putnam's long prominence in mountaineering organizations, national and international, tended to obscure his stature as one of the foremost mountaineers of his generation.

Brought up by his father to love the outdoors, he began his mountaineering career by joining the Harvard Mountaineering Club and the Appalachian Mountain Club, becoming a hut boy in the White Mountains, a breed the rest of us were taught to admire for their strength and derring-do. It was in this capacity that he came under the jurisdiction of a figure who would become one of his principal mentors, the formidable Joe Dodge, head of the AMC hut system, a rough-hewn New Englander based at Pinkham Notch who had helped scores of restless young men like Bill find a constructive path through life.

As soon as Bill turned 18, such learning as had been taking place at Harvard was interrupted by his acceptance into the recently organized mountain troops, with which he trained in Alaska and the West. When the troops were regrouped as the Tenth Mountain Division and sent to Italy to participate in the drive through the Apennines in the winter of 1945, he saw combat as a lieutenant and platoon leader, emerging with two purple hearts along with bronze and silver stars for gallantry in action.

Resuming his geological studies at Harvard in 1946, he organized and led the first American ascent of Mt. St. Elias (18,008'), the highest peak on the border between Alaska and Canada, one made famous by the Duke of the Abruzzi's mammoth expedition of 1897. It was on this climb that Bill realized he was unable to function above 16,000 feet, owing to the extensive damage to his lung and the deeply embedded shrapnel still remaining from the wounds received in Italy. Accordingly, while many of his friends won fame on the high peaks of other continents, Bill, who, with his extraordinary energy and stamina, would have been prominent among them, turned to "The Glittering Mountains of Canada" (to cite Monroe Thorington, Bill's predecessor in writing Canadian guidebooks), absorbing their geography, history, and lore, and endeavoring to perpetuate it for a new generation of climbers. Canada had, in fact, been the principal focus for many of the pioneer mountaineers of the American Alpine Club, including its first president, Charles Fay, along with former presidents Howard Palmer, Henry Bryant, Monroe Thorington, and Henry Hall, as well as numerous other members.

Even Bill did not know the precise number of first ascents he had made in his lifetime, but he guessed around 200. Most of these were in the Selkirks, the range in which Palmer completed many of his exploratory climbs. Only those who have tried it themselves can fully appreciate the difficulty of struggling through the thick and punishing underbrush of the Selkirks—until then the least explored of the Canadian ranges—to gain some isolated and untrodden peak. Nor was Bill content with exploration alone; his training as a geologist and his keen sense of history led him to issue in 1947 an enlargement and revision of Thorington's *Guide to the Interior Ranges of British Columbia* (1937), which he continued to revise over three subsequent editions, the last in 1971. He also built three huts in the interior ranges, the largest of which he deeded to the Alpine Club of Canada and which is now appropriately named the Bill Putnam Hut. For his many services to Canadian mountaineering he was also made an Honorary Member of the ACC in 1985 as well as an honorary member of the Association of Canadian Mountain Guides in 1997.

Another chapter in Bill's alpine career was his service to mountain rescue. When cliffs were involved, New Hampshire officials found that they could call on the Harvard Mountaineering Club, of which Bill had become president, and for long after his graduation they continued to rely on Bill's leadership. His motor races to the latest emergency soon resulted in a wide acquaintance among the state's finest,

until one day in 1962 he and his colleagues were called upon to remove the bodies of two would-be climbers who had fatally fallen on the cliffs near the Old Man of the Mountain and were still dangling from their rope. The large crowd which had gathered to watch included the governor, and thenceforth a gubernatorial order smoothed Bill's way north. At about this same time he began working with the AMC and with the N.H. State Fish and Game Department on programs of formal training in mountain rescue. He also started the Mt. Washington Ski Patrol.

Such a mountaineering career garnered many honors, the first of which was election in 1945 to the American Alpine Club, in those days an honor in itself. In 1969 he was elected to the Council (later Board of Directors), on which he served in one capacity or another for the next 30 years, becoming president in 1974 and thereafter treasurer from 1977 to 1991. An old iconoclast and rebel himself, he always had a sympathetic ear for the outsider and did much to make the newer western members of the Club feel valued and at home among the traditional Easterners.

Bill's was the era in which a quiet word to a high-ranking official could cut through bureaucratic procedure to keep the mountains open for climbing, and in this regard the club often benefitted from his membership on the National Advisory Board of the U.S. Forest Service. Always conscious, moreover, of the club's role as promoter of the scientific aspects of mountain exploration, he led his family in the establishment of the Roger Putnam Fund for Alpine Research, in honor of their father.

Following his resignation as treasurer Bill was elected an Honorary Member and awarded the Angelo Heilprin Citation (1980), an award for service to the club that he himself had devised during his presidency. Upon the death of Henry Hall in 1987, he was elected Honorary President, the ultimate tribute to his years of service to the AAC and to the cause of North American mountaineering. True it is, though, that yesterday's radicals are tomorrow's conservatives. As Honorary President he continued to act as the historian and conscience of the club during the period of rapid growth necessary for undertaking a new and broader mission. His principal concern was that the volunteer board continue to be the principal source of initiative in Club affairs.

But his service was not confined to North American mountaineering. For 30 years, either formally or informally, he acted as the club's delegate to the International Union of Alpine Clubs (UIAA) and in 2002 was elected vice president as well as an honorary member. As an influential delegate he took part in drafting one of the most visible acts of the UIAA, the Declaration of Kathmandu in 1982 calling for vigorous measures to protect the flora and fauna of the alpine environment worldwide, long one of his major preoccupations.

Space prevents more than a mention of Bill's noteworthy career in television, beginning with the founding in 1952 of WWLP in Springfield, the first licensed UHF television station in the United States, or his role as chair of the NBC affiliates organization and his eventual election to the Broadcasting Hall of Fame in 2001. Nor is there time to dilate on his service as sole trustee of the Lowell Observatory in Flagstaff, Arizona, from 1987 to 2013, during which quarter-century the Observatory opened itself to the outside world and partnered with the Discovery Channel to build one of the world's most advanced telescopes. He also took seriously his service on the board of the Mt. Washington Observatory, an important institution for the science of meteorology. His numerous books, all written with his usual immediacy and panache, range from freedom of the press to railway tunnels. At the time of his death he was working on a projected three-volume history of the passes of the Swiss-Italian Alps, the first volume of which examined the much-debated question of which pass Hannibal had used to lead his army into Italy, but approaching the issue from the point of view of the elephants.

All Bill's achievements evince the same remarkable vision, innovation, and drive. His nearly superhuman energy was matched by his imposing physical stature and the strength of his convictions. Coupled with the last was a frank outspokenness that sometimes gave offense. The young friends he continued to introduce to the joys of wilderness mountaineering started to call him "Bear," a nickname so appropriate it was taken up his family and even some of his not-so-young

friends.

Although quite aware of his ancestry—he came from two of New England’s most illustrious families—it affected neither his conduct nor his judgment of persons. In fact, he rather reveled in what he liked to call his “uncouthness.” An irreverent sense of humor and a kind of impishness characterized him from boyhood to old age. The family loved to tell of his mother’s instructing his siblings on one occasion to “Go find Billy and tell him whatever he is doing to stop it.” As a young member of the AAC he tested the limits by attempting to have his dog—baptized “Henry Pinkham” for the occasion—elected a member of the AAC. Only after the Council had voted affirmatively did then-President Brad Gilman, perhaps knowing the sponsors too well, sniff a rat, but as Bill pointed out the dog had indeed made the climbs, and there were no actual rules prohibiting the election of dogs.

Bill had a particularly strong sense of justice and engaged in many a battle on behalf of those wronged by life, both in politics and on a personal level. His long campaign to rehabilitate the reputation of the pioneer climber Fritz Wiessner, wrongly blamed in Bill’s opinion for the deaths on the ill-fated 1939 K2 expedition, ended with Fritz elected to Honorary Membership in the AAC and with publication of *K2: The 1939 Tragedy* (1992), written with Andy Kauffman.

A stoutly loyal friend himself, Bill demanded the complete loyalty of family and close friends, a trait that at times could make life difficult for everyone. Other than his parents, the one person to whom he consistently deferred was his beloved wife Kitty Broman, his longtime business partner, whom he married in 1999 after the death of his first wife, Joan Fitzgerald in 1993. Kitty’s loss in early January 2014 left him deeply bereft during the 10 months which remained to him before his own death at the venerable age of 90.

In conclusion, I can do no better than to cite the words of his friend, John Radway: “Bill was life writ large—brilliant, vigorous, and creative—sometimes abrasive but full of love for his friends and for humanity. He will always be with us.”

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