



## AAC Publications

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### Forgotten Mountaineer

Dr. Cora Johnstone Best: An American in the Canadian Rockies

**English historian Bettany Hughes states, “The stories of women have been written out of history, rather than written in.” In the case of Minneapolis-born Dr. Cora Johnstone Best (1884–1930), her displacement from alpine history began soon after her death, when her name was lost in the depths of museum archives and forgotten newspaper clippings.** A contemporary of accomplished mountaineers such as Phyllis Munday in Canada, and Georgia Engelhard and Miriam O’Brien Underhill in the United States, Best was a recognized leader in the Alpine Club of Canada in the 1920s, yet her accomplishments are little-known in her home country. Once called “the biggest little woman in the outdoor world,” her life and role-challenging work as a guide should be more than a footnote in the growing body of work about early female mountaineers.

Overcoming “straitened circumstances” in childhood, Best became a physician, married a fellow doctor, and then used her financial independence to push boundaries as a mountaineer, traveling lecturer, filmmaker, pilot, and conservationist. News reports indicate she began her mountaineering career by exploring Yellowstone and other U.S. parks. Although little is known of her early climbs, she joined the Alpine Club of Canada (ACC) in 1920 and quickly made a name for herself north of the border. The ACC was a popular club among many American climbers (in fact the American Alpine Club originally proposed creating the ACC as a section of the U.S. club, though that idea was quickly quashed). The Canadian club, co-founded by journalist Elizabeth Parker, included more than 40 percent women in its membership lists by the end of World War I.

In 1922, Best launched the Minnesota Section of the ACC, becoming that club’s first female section head, and she trained and led Minnesota members on their graduating climbs. Over the next eight seasons, she and her traveling companion, artist and photographer Audrey Shippam (1883–1975), climbed many peaks in the Canadian Rockies and Columbia Mountains, including several first ascents.

Contemporaneous sources suggest she was a lifetime or honorary member of the Swiss, Japanese, and British alpine clubs—along with her Canadian club activities—but even though about 15 percent of the members of the American Alpine Club in the mid-1920s were women, Best does not appear to have been one of them. The full archives of the AAC are not easily searched, but a preliminary search found no record of her seeking membership. (Prospective members had to apply and be recommended by two sponsors in those days.) Nor did her name ever appear in the pages of the *American Alpine Journal*. Yet her climbing record suggests she would have been well qualified.

In the mid-1920s, Best and Shippam climbed the northwest are te of Mt. Sir Donald and scored a second ascent of Mt. Sir Douglas. The Nashville Banner reported that she climbed Mt. Assiniboine, and she and Shippam climbed Mt. Robson in 1924, hauling film equipment to make the first movie on that mountain. (Robson was first climbed by women earlier in the same season, with the honors going to Phyllis Munday and then several others, including Helen Buck from New York, the American Alpine Club’s second librarian.) That year, the pair made the first female ascent of difficult Hungabee Mountain, accompanied by Swiss guide Rudolf Aemmer.

With another well-known guide, Christian Ha sler, Best and Shippam shared the first ascent of Iconoclast Mountain in the Selkirks and a new route on Popes Peak. A storm broke out on the latter expedition, and the Minneapolis Star wrote that all three “narrowly escaped death in an avalanche as

they were descending on ice-covered slopes.” As for Iconoclast, the Selkirks North guidebook says, “The original approach [in June 1924] was a very difficult three-day trip, through the bush and alder of Ventego Creek, in deep snow. The party...gained the summit by the long, badly corniced east ridge.” They traversed the peak, descending by the northeast glacier, and also made the first ascents of two smaller peaks in the area.

Best and Shippam often climbed with paid guides—as did many highly experienced male climbers of the day—or with fellow participants in the ACC’s annual summer mountaineering camps. But Best led many climbs herself, without a guide. According to Best’s obituary in the *Canadian Alpine Journal*, written by Shippam, Best took the lead on Victoria, Lefroy, Huber, Odaray, Tupper, and other prominent Canadian peaks, “on these ascents graduating new climbers for the club on major peaks.”

Indeed, Best’s role as an early female guide is perhaps the most intriguing part of her story. In that era, the prominent guides in the Rockies were from the European Alps, employed by Canadian Pacific Railway to serve the growing tourism industry. There were no guiding organizations, qualifying standards, or tests like those of today’s Association of Canadian Mountain Guides (or the AMGA in the United States). What distinguished Best from most female mountaineers active in the Rockies in the mid-1920s was her leadership role on ACC climbs and other outings. Early on, the ACC encouraged a few select women to lead all-female parties as a way of giving them freedom from male leadership. ACC co-founder Arthur Wheeler described Best as “a skilled mountaineer and competent to take charge of a rope.” Best also guided men from the Minneapolis section, and *Canadian National Magazine* reported that she had at least one man on her rope during her failed first attempt on Robson, when her party was turned back by poor weather.

Best appears to have earned several other stamps of approval for guiding (though it’s unclear if this involved mountain guiding or other forms of outdoor activity). In Best’s obituary in the *Canadian Alpine Journal*, Shippam wrote: “She was accorded special privileges in all national parks by both the United States and Canadian Governments and was commissioned a fully licensed guide by the Department of the Interior of Canada.” Newspapers also report she was a “registered guide of the Canadian National Parks.”

Best’s mountaineering accomplishments and many other feats helped her become a darling of the press and a popular lecturer around North America. The *Detroit News* described her as “a woman who has dared death in a dozen forms and undertaken feats of strength and endurance that few men could have overcome as smoothly and calmly.” Breathless hyperbole aside, comparisons of her abilities to those of her male counterparts are a reminder that women who challenged traditional masculine roles in mountaineering were on the front lines of the burgeoning feminist movement. Although attitudes were changing, alpinism, especially at its highest levels, was still a predominantly masculine sport in the 1920s. Best told audiences that “mountain climbing is a science” and therefore, once armed with the requisite knowledge, being a woman was no impediment to being a climber. She stated unequivocally, “there is no sex in mountain climbing.”

Off the mountain, Best eschewed female stereotypes by embracing physical challenges like white-water paddling and learning to shoot with a bow and arrow in order to hunt wild boar. She also hunted whales and drove dog sleds in Alaska, dug up dinosaur bones in the Alberta Badlands, and learned to fly a plane. She told the press: “I’m just a rebel, I guess. I seem to have to do the things they say can’t be done.”

She and Shippam were among the original members of the influential group Trail Riders of the Canadian Rockies, where Best served in various leadership roles and logged more than 2,500 miles in the company of cowboys, poets, artists, and intellectuals. The club was founded on the progressive principle that “sex, age, race, creed, profession, or colour” had no bearing on membership, and Best evidently upheld that motto in her personal life. She backed efforts to include Japanese climbers as members of the ACC, and she used her growing popularity in the press to denounce gender barriers: “Life has undreamed of depths and heights, and women as well as men

can experience them," she said.

Best's refusal either to be limited by or to renounce her femininity made her stand apart from her peers, and the press took notice of her open defiance of social norms. A reporter asked of her husband: "Does he let you go off on these expeditions whenever you want to?" She replied, "There's no such word as 'let' in this family." Both she and Shippam remained childless and traveled the world much of the year without their husbands.

The duo shot film and took photos in remote locations of rare plants and animals for use during Best's popular off-season lectures. Best took no profit from her lectures or films, and she eventually gave up medicine to climb and lecture year-round, with the goal of bringing more men and women into better health through communion with nature. This included being an advocate for equal and affordable park access and a promotor of physical fitness. She railed against the rise of obesity in America with the motto, "the longer the belt, the shorter the life."

Despite her shoot-from-the-hip verbal style, Best was a beloved member of the ACC. After Best's untimely death in 1930 from a lung infection contracted while climbing in Switzerland, Shippam paid tribute to her "poet's soul" and "vagabond heart," and Bliss Carman, author of *Songs from Vagabondia*, called her "one of life's music makers."

Best wrote in the *Canadian Alpine Journal* in 1923: "There isn't a mountain trip that isn't worthwhile." In celebrating her achievements, we celebrate a generation of women who pushed against the practical and social boundaries of their era to forge a prominent place in the alpine. Other remarkable mountaineering women are no doubt waiting to be discovered. It's up to us to make those worthwhile journeys to revisit their lives and give them their deserved place in our collective memory.

**About the Author:** Cheryl Jacklin-Piraino is a Canadian editor and poet who has spent 20 seasons exploring the Canadian Rockies.

## **AUTHOR'S ADDENDUM**

In October 2022, about six months after the 2022 AAJ went to press, the author of this article discovered troubling quotes attributed to Dr. Cora Johnstone Best in newspaper accounts of her lectures.

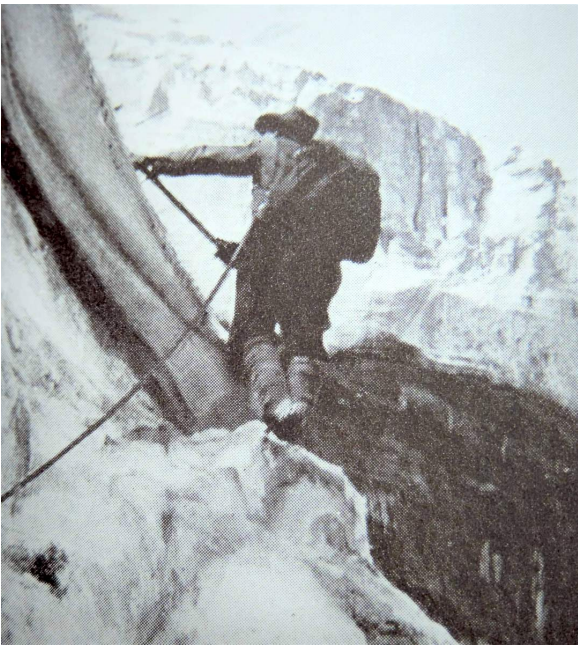
Cheryl Jacklin-Piraino explains below:

During her lectures, Dr. Best apparently made various statements supporting eugenics, a movement that began in the 19th century and aimed to "improve" the human race through selective breeding, and she spoke of the "survival of the white race." She also made derogatory statements about people with impairments. I regret these significant remarks were not known to me before my article went to press, since they are integral to a full understanding of Best's character. Her racist and ableist statements, which appear to have waned later in her career, stand in contradiction to her position on the council of the Trail Riders of the Canadian Rockies, a group with an explicit anti-racist bylaw. Her apparently contradictory nature is also evident in her support of Jewish youth and Japanese alpinists at a time when both ethnicities faced discrimination, and in her support of Russian Dukhobor immigrants who were the target of assimilation efforts by the Canadian government. It is my hope that future research by myself and others will reveal the full implications of Dr. Best's feminist and social activism juxtaposed against her racist views, and how her rhetoric may have impacted those inside and outside the climbing community.

## Images



Cora J. Best (left) and Audrey Shippam in 1924, following their ascent of Hungabee Mountain.



Cora Best leading up glacial ice on Farnham Tower in the Purcell Mountains, British Columbia, in 1923



Cora Johnstone Best, ca 1930.



The head of a Fritz Jörg ice axe personalized for Dr. Best.

## Article Details

Author	Cheryl Jacklin-Piraino
Publication	AAJ
Volume	64
Issue	96
Page	100
Copyright Date	2022
Article Type	Climbs and expeditions