Mary Vaux Walcott (1860-1940)

“The Audubon of Botany”

Author/illustrator of the 5 volume North American Wild Flowers, Smithsonian (1925-29) 

Featured in Montana’s Pioneer Botanist: Exploring the Mountains and Prairies (2017)

Mary came under the spell of the Canadian Rockies when her well to do, Philadelphia Quaker family first visited in 1887, and she continued to come back many summers until her death 53 years later. Mary and her brothers soon moved the remaining glaciers and started photographing and measuring them, a project continued by family into this century. A founding board member of the Alpine Club of Canada, Mary was the first known woman to summit a 10,000’ peak in Canada when she climbed Yoho National Park’s Mt. Stephans in 1900.

Mary packed glass plates in her saddle bags and developed film in cold suns at night during month-long trips in the mountains. l- Whyte Museum; r- Smithsonian Institution

The glacierlily seems to radiate the spirit of the high places, and with bright sunshine and pure air helps to entice the lover of nature to the mountain tops along the edges of the melting snow. The pointed green, natural grace and beauty of the plant without artificial design. Many of the western sketches were made under trying conditions. Often, on a mountain side or high pass, a fire was necessary to a conventional design. Many of the western sketches were made under trying conditions. Often, on a mountain top, a fire was necessary to our experience with saguaro mariposa was a revelation of nature’s methods. Our camp had been pitched on a dry level fifty feet above the Kootenay River near Canal Flats, British Columbia where sage vegetation indicated a lack moisture. One night a heavy storm of wind and rain came up. A few days later the winds were met by the back of the saguaro mariposa were almost ready to seed, and even the plants were in perfect bloom.

Foreword, Mary Vaux Walcott, 1925

Mary Vaux Walcott:

“…covering in all more than five thousand miles on the mountain trails ... my aim being to depict the beauty, color and graceful outline as a living thing … I painted after very great care and much of the ‘living flowers that shall the earth fill’ in the wildflower gardens of the Canadian Rockies were translated into color and firm in the East, where shadows of the nation woodlands and mountain blooms once began to join them.

During the past two years I have spent in the mountains in each season of this century. A founding board member of the Alpine Club of Canada, Mary was the first known woman to summit a 10,000’ peak in Canada when she climbed Yoho National Park’s Mt. Stephans in 1900. During the past ten years I have spent from three to four months each season in the Canadian Rockies ... seeing in all more than five thousand miles on the mountain trails ... my aim being to depict the wildflowers in their natural grace and beauty of the plant without artificial design. Many of the western sketches were made under trying conditions. Often, on a mountain top, a fire was necessary to prepare a conventional design. Many of the western sketches were made under trying conditions. Often, on a mountain top, a fire was necessary to prepare a conventional design.

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