

The Alps – A Much Contested Space

Tanja Wirz, *Gipfelstürmerinnen. Eine Geschlechtergeschichte des Alpinismus in der Schweiz 1840-1940*

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Wirz' doctoral thesis on the history of women mountaineering in Switzerland between 1840 and 1940, goes beyond the mere academic-informative – it dares to be an entertaining read too. While showing with great aplomb that the depiction of the Alps and of “conquering” them always implies a meta-discourse on dominance and othering, Wirz does not fall into the trap of re-hashing truisms about the so-called battle between the sexes.

The book is, in a somewhat loose, non-chronological order, structured into the sections of “Mountaineering as a Symbolical Practice”, “Hiking in the National Monument [that is the Alps]”, “The Order of the Sexes in the Alpine Clubs”, “Women in the High Mountains”, “Clothes, the Body and Competition”, “Mountaineering in Public Discourse” and “The Limits of Climbing Up”. Thus Wirz first explores the elements of and different approaches towards mountaineering, how the prevailing European imperialism instigated the Swiss point of view that the Alps were a territory which had to be conquered (preferably by Swiss men), how women were excluded from membership of the Alpine Clubs, in particular the SAC (Swiss Alpine Club), and then the author focuses in the second half of her book, on the role of women in (mainly Swiss) society in general and of women mountaineers in particular.

Through various case-studies, the author documents how Swiss men appropriated the Alps as a physical and spiritual space for the development of manliness and how women were systematically excluded from this male territory. The underlying discourse of the concepts of colonialism and of the treatment of the Other does receive a mention, but could have been explored and applied in greater detail.

It seems that women in those days had a lot to fear if they tried to hike up a mountain: the loss of their reputation as a lady, the ridicule of even their guides who would at times testify that they had to carry these daring women up to the peak, the public shunning of someone who

pursued an aim for which women “clearly” were not fit. After decades of trying unsuccessfully to please the (almost) exclusively male members of the Swiss Alpine Club and to be accepted by them, it was small wonder that the Swiss female mountaineers saw themselves forced to form their own Alpine Club.

Wirz compares the founding of the Swiss Women’s Alpine Club (SFAC) to the English Ladies’ Alpine Club (LAC). While interestingly both clubs, in order to be tolerated by their male counterparts, use metaphors of dependence and inferiority (by calling themselves the “sisters” or “children” of the men’s clubs – p 205), the English seem to have had much more fun than the Swiss, for whom the ascending to high peaks was often likened to achieving higher aims and the building of character. Wirz sees one possible reason for this different approach to mountaineering in the fact that it was more common for unmarried English women to work and that they were thus able to earn their own money, which was theirs to spend during the holidays as they saw fit, while their Swiss sisters had to legitimise their doings by searching for spiritual enlightenment or serving the Swiss people (p 209).

This is true to some extent, though Wirz does not elaborate on the situation of women in post-First World War Britain, which was much more class-conscious than Switzerland at the time. British women did indeed, due to their war efforts, officially “earn” not only the right to vote (for which Swiss women in one particular canton had to wait another eighty years), but also the right to work; yet the acceptance of working middle- and upper-class women was not as widespread as Wirz presents it. Even novels like Richard Aldington’s *Women Must Work* (1934) turn out to be a thinly veiled disapproval of the unfeminine activity of pursuing a career. In fact, Wirz herself is not entirely free from a more conservative approach to assessing women’s feats when she comments on a nineteenth-century ascent by Lucy Walker, the first woman to succeed in climbing the Matterhorn, in 1871: “The fact that she – *for reasons unknown to me* – remained unmarried, did not help [her reputation amongst the public] either” (p 219; reviewer’s translation and emphasis). Even Wirz seems to assume that there have to be reasons for a woman not to marry; however, on the whole she presents the reader with well-documented findings on how men, threatened by women’s physical and mental strength, tried to regulate the other sex’s endeavours.

All in all, this is a well-researched gender history, contextualising Swiss women’s mountaineering during a time of great changes with

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regard to the perception of women's rights, health and decorum.
Hopefully this book will become available in English in future.

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