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But what do I wear: A study of women's climbing attire

Claire Evans

Abstract

Mrs Henry Warwick-Coleman advises the lady climber on her attire in her 1859 publication, *A Lady's Tour Round Monte Rosa*. She suggests 'A lady's dress is inconvenient for mountaineering', continuing 'even under the most careful management, and therefore every device which may render it less so should be adopted''

Throughout history clothing can be seen to have been responsible for the development of many theory's and concepts that have become embedded within the social structure of communities. They form a framework around which society has and still does establish rules, codes and beliefs, embedding a deep sense of social conformity through 'uniforms' that express moods and personalities.

Emancipation opened up the opportunity for women, to take an active role in the sport of climbing, yet conflicts arose, when it came to the attire they were expected to wear. For women breaking dress codes would cause a scandal, whilst becoming the first to ascend a peak; had its prizes.

This paper investigates historical documentation related to the development of women's climbing and climbing clothing from 1806 to the twentieth century. This will provide an outline of the clothing developmental stages that have taken place and the struggle for inclusion and recognition that women have faced on the mountain.

Key Words: Women climbers, Victorian women climbers, climbing clothing, Victorian leisure **CONSIDER OTHER WORDS**

1. The call of the mountains

On 3rd September 1838 at 6am Henriette d' Angeville was in the foyer of her hotel ready to start her ascent of Mont Blanc. The publicity surrounding the event drew in crowds, excited to see the French aristocrat in her forty-fourth year setting off with her porters and guide.

Henriette's plans were seen as reckless. The expedition's organisation had been thwarted with difficulty. Henriette was apparently a strong and able climber, who was determined to do the climb herself unaided. She was clear that she wanted no support, beyond that offered by guides, to gentlemen climbers. Behaviour that was far from lay like.

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Guides and porters had been difficult to appoint, following an unsuccessful expedition in 1820 which resulted in three climber's deaths. The fact that this attempt was been made, and, organised by a woman, raised even more opposition. Henriette considered herself to have only five supporters and quoted the reaction of most to be 'But was an extraordinary idea' followed by 'She must be prevented from such madness'.¹ Yet Henriette's determination held her in good stead. She wouldn't be the first woman to the peak. That record was held by Maria Paradis. In 1808 Maria had been carried most of the way by her guides, in what appears to have been a publicity stunt. Henriette would be the first to truly do the climb.

A fortnight before setting off Henriette put together her provision requirements and clothing needs for the trip, the clothing list is lengthy, but this was a major climb. It included, a mans shirt to be worn on top of combinations of English flannel and a pair of trousers, cut full, corded at the top, with gaiters to tuck into boots. As she said herself 'One does not attend the court of the King of the Alps in a silk dress and a gauze bonnet; this venture requires a plainer garb'.² She recorded the fact, that the costume she wore weighed twenty one pounds in total. She also had a portrait painted of herself in her climbing ensemble, as she explained 'to satisfy general curiosity'.³

Henriette was probably the first woman to publicly record what she wore whilst climbing. It was a far cry from the "submissive" look of the 1840's, which was just developing - sloping shoulders, childlike ringlets and poke bonnets⁴. It is interesting to note, that Henriette appeared at ease mentioning that she wore trousers in her list of clothing needs, and, acknowledged the fact that she wore knickerbockers under her skirt in herself portrait. Yet in her written records she seems conscious of the parties appearance when setting off and discusses how she was assured that they 'looked very well'. For the first part of the journey she wore a dress of brown merino and white trousers, with a little hat of light straw and a gauze veil. An outfit that would have appeared all the more respectable to onlookers watching her party depart from the valley.

Anne Lister, (who ran Shibden Hall near Halifax, England) was also climbing in the 1830's, making regular climbing visits to the less publicised Pyrenees. On 7th August 1838 she embarked on an ascent of Vignemale. From the cabane des Saoussats Dabats, Anne set off with three guides, and, successfully ascended the previously thought inaccessible French side off the mountain. Her story did not however end here, one of her guides, Cazaux, them took the Prince of Moscowa up the same mountain four days later, telling the Prince that Anna had not gone to the top. The Prince was then acknowledged as having completed the first amateur ascent of Vignemale, from the French side. Anna disputed this, and consulted a lawyer, refusing to

pay Cazaux his fee, until he corrected the story. He duly agreed and signed his name to a document saying the same. Having accredited Anna with the ascent, Cazaux also remarked, that she had “got up very well too”.⁵

For the ascent of Vignemale, Anne was prepared. ‘I was dressed as I have been ever since my arrival here, for riding’ she recalled. She was wearing a multitude of layers to keep warm, including petticoats, a black merino dress, flannel waistcoat and shawls. She noted:

‘I had had tape loops put around the bottom of my dress and strings at the top and just before setting off, had my dress tied up all round me just about or above the knee. I wore white cotton socks and black spun-silk legs with tape straps’. Whiles wearing all this cumbersome attire she felt herself to be, ‘lightly equipped and light of heart’⁶.

During the 1850’s three extended trips to the Alps were made by Mrs Henry Warwick-Coleman, she completely circled the 15,203 foot high Monte Rosa, as well as climbing several other minor peaks. Her publication in 1859 of *A Lady’s Tour Round Monte Rosa* provides accounts of her adventures. In what is thought to be the first publication by a female alpinist in English. She wanted to encourage others to follow her example and wrote her accounts with this in mind.⁷

In regard to what should be worn whilst out climbing, she suggests a broad-brimmed hat, to relieve ladies of their parasol and a dress of light woollen material that will ‘not look utterly forlorn when it has once been wetted and dried’ She then discusses as Anne Lister did, the improvised use of rings and cord to draw the skirt up. Reasoning this by stating that, ‘if the dress is too long, it catches the stones, especially when coming down hill, and sends them rolling on those below. I have heard more than one gentleman complain of painful blows suffered from such accidents’⁸

From 1880 to the early twentieth century Elizabeth (Lizzie) Le Blond, born into a wealth Victorian family made numerous climbs of the main alpine peaks. She found herself being sent to Switzerland to recuperate from exhaustion and consumption. Whilst there she eventual grew to love the mountains after initially denouncing the wickedness of those that risked their lives” for nothing”.⁹ She was also one of the first women to take up winter alpinism and the founding president of the Ladies’ Alpine Club in 1907. She was a passionate climber who was determined to reach her goals and was not going to be held back by Victorian etiquette. She describes an event that happened to her whilst climbing:

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“I had an awkward experience connected with climbing dress having left my skirt on top of a rock with a heavy stone to keep it in place, a big avalanche gaily whisked it away before our eyes, as we descended that afternoon. Unwilling to venture across the couloir so late under the hot sun in search of it, I came down just as I was till close to the village where I remained concealed behind a clump of trees while Imboden fetched a skirt from my room at the hotel. I had carefully explained to him exactly where he would find a suitable one, but to my horror, he appeared after a long interval with my best evening dress over his arm! There was nothing for it but to slink in when he gave the word that all was clear, and dash up to my room hoping I should meet no one on the stairs.”¹⁰

2. Conspicuous Victorian life back home

Away from the mountains; life was very different for the conventional Victorian woman. They were perceived as following genteel lifestyles, conformed and trapped by their clothing. The concept of women becoming involved in leisure activities was just starting to be established. This was, however, not due to the need to get fit, or the urge to be the first to climb a mountain. Instead it was embroiled in the Victorian class system. The bourgeois middle-class lady needed to promote the image of being a member of the leisured classes. She represented her families' wealth through her attire and her social standing. 'The idleness of the bourgeois 'lady' became symbolic of her husband's or father's material success- her finery reflected his affluence, and the way in which she organized her leisure defined his social standing' ¹¹

The perception of a life of leisure, inevitably, started to become a reality for middle class women. Social standing demanded that conspicuous leisure time needed to be organised, yet the activity had to remain restrained, respectable and ladylike. By the mid 18th century lawn croquet had become a common pastime. Croquet was a tame game, which allowed women to fill their conspicuous recreation time whilst remaining dignified.¹²By the 1860's walking was also become popular pastimes.

These leisure activities were still a far cry from the physical endurance of mountain climbing, which was neither leisurely nor ladylike. The intolerance women climbers encountered, is evident in the following remarks, sent to the mother of Elizabeth Le Blond by her great aunt; Lady

Bentinck. 'Stop her climbing mountains! She is scandalizing all London and looks like a red Indian!' ¹³

3. Codes and Contradictions

Outside of the Alpine climbing fraternity, prejudicial contradictions still remained between the leisure activities being participated in by women and the restrictive clothing been worn when taking part. During the 1840's the Victorian lady was still wearing her tight fitting corset and weighty petticoats. In the 1850's the lighter cage crinoline or hoop skirt arrived, this allowed women to gain greater volume in their skirts with less fabric weight. The fitted corset remained and ironically tight-lacing regained popularity. It was not until the late 1850s that the walking or travelling dresses emerged. These dresses had skirts that could be looped-up, in a method closely resembling that used by the early climbers. Walking dresses still had a large hem circumference and corsets were still worn as under garments.

Drawers were introduced into English women's dress as underclothes around the 1800's being worn until then only almost exclusively by men. (The French however appeared to adopt them much earlier as far back as the middle of the sixteenth century.) During the 1840s drawers were plain and reached below the knee. They became more ornamental in the next decade as the walking dress was introduced and the ankles started to be seen. During the winter months drawers were replaced by colourful flannel knickerbockers. ¹⁴

The physical emancipation of women's dress was progressing slowly, with moves towards freer, lighter dress being restricted by the circumference of hems and tight-lacing. There appears to have been 'two widely differing dispositions opposed to each other; and the battle, swinging to and fro with the ultimate victory as yet uncertain' ¹⁵

4. Alpine Emancipation

Climbing appears to have established a world at odds with the conformist view; of Victorian women's life style. Etiquette and dress were frequently compromised to make the act of climbing easier. Skirts were drawn up and sometimes removed, trousers worn, and, help rejected. Emancipation had started to arrive in the Alps, with very little opposition. Women were been respected for their climbing prowess and starting to ascend the peaks alongside men. Husbands, fathers and brothers often made the ascent with them, but not always. Women were still not climbing alone, but were gaining the respect of the Alpine climbing fraternity. They were leading major expeditions, going out unchaperoned onto mountains, often ending up having to stay in small huts, or tents over night, with male guides and porters.

It appears as if a secret air of concealment surrounded much of the climbing and climbing attire worn by these pioneering women. This involved

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women climbers breaking traditional Victorian dress codes, with the understanding that their climbing partners kept this secret in order to avert a scandal. The true nature of their climbing dress and exploits remaining hidden. Inevitably fellow male climbers, guides and porters must have supported them in the charade. If no break in dress codes was seen, it could not then be questioned. 'I owe a supreme debt of gratitude to the mountains for knocking from me the shackles of conventionality, but I had to struggle hard for my freedom' Elizabeth L'Blond recalled.¹⁶

The Ladies Alpine Club Exhibition of May 1910 provided an opportunity for the clothing being worn by serious women climbers of the time to be seen. It provided an opportunity for women's climbing attire to be viewed as functional sports clothing. Establish an understanding amongst wider society of the needs of female climbers to ensure their easily movement and safety whilst climbing. It was however still seen as conventional to wear your skirt when approaching the climb, removing it only before you start your ascent.

Notes

¹ H. D'Angeville, *My Ascent of Mont Blanc*, HaperCollins, London, 1992 p.xx

² *ibid* p.xxi

³ *ibid* p.22

⁴ E Wilson, Taylor, L., *Through the Looking Glass: A history of dress from 1860 to the present day*, BBC Books, London, 1989, p.20.

⁵ V Ingham, *Anne Lister in the Pyrenees*, Transactions of the Halifax Antiquarian Society, Halifax Antiquarian Society, 1969, p.69.

⁶ *ibid* p.64.

⁷ D Mazel, *Mountaineering Women: Stories by early climber*, A&M University Press, Texas, 1994, p.6. K Stansdin, 'An Easy Day for a Lady...': *The Dress of Early Women Mountaineers*, *Costume*, Number 38, 2004, p.76.

⁸ Mrs Henry Warwick Coleman, *A Lady's Tour Round Monte Rosa: with visits to the Italian Valleys in the years 1850-1856*, Longman, London, 1859, pp.6-7.

⁹ A Le Blond, *Day in Day out*, The Bodley Head LTD, London, 1928, p.87.

¹⁰ A Le Blond, *Then and now*, Ladies Alpine Yearbook, 1932, p.6

¹¹ N Wymer, *Sporting in England*, Harrap, London, 1949 in Hargreaves, J. *Sporting females Critical issues in the history and sociology of women's*

sport, Rouledge, London, 1996, p.52.

¹² J Hargreaves, *Sporting females Critical issues in the history and sociology of women's sport*, Rouledge, London, 1996, p53.

¹³ A Le Blond, *Day in Day out*, The Bodley Head LTD, London, 1928, p.90.

¹⁴ C Willett, P Cunnington, *The history of underclothes*, Faber and Faber, London, 1981, p.100-106

¹⁵ *ibid* p.100.

¹⁶ A Le Blond, *Day in Day out*, The Bodley Head LTD, London, 1928, p.90.

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