
ED DOUGLAS

Some Advice on Marriage

This is an edited version of a lecture given for the Banff Mountain Book Festival Tour on the sometimes lonely path taken by some of mountaineering's pre-eminent women.

I want to give you some advice on marriage:

The right girl will come along sooner or later – if you have kept your head. You will find a girl whose character you admire and respect, whose tastes are like your own and whose comradeship you long for. It will not be merely her person that attracts you, but her personality. You will find a new, calmer and deeper form of love that links and binds you to her – one which, if you are wise, will never grow less.

... There may be times of trouble, little difficulties in the home which you don't foresee at first. Before you married you only did things for yourself; now that you are married you've got to chuck your self and do things for your wife – and later on for your children.

'Grousing won't mend matters; instead, give and take and SMILE all the time, but most especially at that time when most women get a little off their usual line, just before the first baby arrives. You've got to show your manliness and chivalry as her comforter and protector then.

If she is a little fractious it is through her love for you that she is so. To such attention she will respond. Women are not only more grateful than men, but their character shapes itself according as it is led by their man.

Of course, it's easy to mock the moral attitudes of a man, in this case Lord Baden-Powell, writing in the 1920s for another generation. Although I should point out that my copy of Baden-Powell's manual for a happy life, *Rovering to Success*, is from the twenty-sixth impression of the second edition, published in 1963, the year that Philip Larkin said that sexual intercourse began in his poem *Annus Mirabilis*, between the Chatterley ban and the Beatles' first LP.

Baden-Powell's book had by this point sold over 200,000 copies. When he wrote it, the British Empire was intact, Everest was unclimbed and mountaineering was an activity practised, in Britain at least, by a handful of privileged men and a tiny number of equally privileged women like Lissie Le Blond and Lady Evelyn McDonnel.

In *Rovering to Success*, Baden-Powell writes: 'Under the head of a true sport, and one which is open to all alike without much expense,

is mountaineering.' This wasn't true, remotely, in 1922 but Baden-Powell offers his own speculation on the reasons for this. 'The only wonder,' he writes, 'is that climbing is not better known as a sport. This is largely because fellows don't realise that they can carry it out in almost every part of Great Britain.' This would change during Baden-Powell's lifetime; that the wild tracts of British uplands offered freedom and learning, was well understood by the walking clubs in northern cities before the Second World War and by climbing clubs soon after it.

Baden-Powell, an icon of the imperialist age, the hero of Mafeking, the founder of the scouting and girl guide movements, has been so dismantled by the liberal establishment that it seems unfair to wheel him out again. In 1922 many young men would have thrilled to the word 'Mafeking', the thought of adventure in faraway lands a worthy prospect. Now the average teenager hasn't the faintest idea of where or what Mafeking was. There are fast-food joints in Kathmandu and traffic jams in Bangkok while many young men spend their lives playing computer games. I'll not dwell on Baden-Powell's shortcomings when our own age is awash with them.

All that I will add, is that the section on 'Women' follows those on 'Horses' and 'Wine', and includes the following scenario:

I was in a 'Rovers' Den' when congratulations were being showered on one member on his engagement to be married.

'Who is the girl?'

'Oh, she's a Girl Guide.'

'Splendid! What a good idea! You couldn't do better.'

But immediately two other men chipped in for part of the congratulations, saying that they also were engaged similarly to Girl Guides.

I see promise in this.

You get wives in this way who can be better pals because they have got the same keenness on camping and the out of doors with all the necessary handiness and resourcefulness, health and good temper that comes of such life. I feel certain that if I came to visit you in your home later on, when thus mated, I should find not only a happy home but a clean one; for the premises of campers, who were accustomed to leave their camp grounds as neat as they found them.

There's an innocence about this which is rather attractive, although I can't imagine what Lord B-P would have made of Snell's Field or Camp IV in the Yosemite Valley. Anyway, I am more interested in his automatic assumption that women in the outdoors are camp followers, that their independence out of doors ends on the day they marry and that any personal ambition or satisfaction will naturally be subsumed by the demands of family life. In *Rovering to Success*, Baden-Powell quotes General Bruce, leader of the first full expedition to Everest, on the appeal of climbing the world's highest mountain. Of course, for the General, the appeal was only to men.

A woman would apply to climb Everest for the 1924 expedition, Anne Bernard, about whom I know absolutely nothing. The Everest Committee, whose members I sometimes confuse with the Monty Python team, told her that it was impossible for them to 'contemplate the application of a lady of whatever nationality,' – I assumed she was French or possibly Belgian from this – because 'the difficulties would be too great.'

And yet it was around this time that the Pinnacle Club was founded, to generate the kinds of numbers that would get women's climbing taken seriously. 'Even then,' wrote Eleanor Winthrop Young, 'after all the madness and death, climbing was regarded as a strange activity. One had really done something drastic by becoming a climber. ... In those days, even up in the Lakes, a girl couldn't walk about a village in climbing clothes without hard stares from the women and sniggers from the youths.'

There were stranger things you could be, at least in public; a lesbian, for example. Freda du Faur, the Australian woman who in 1910 made the first ascent of Mount Cook in the Southern Alps, had a highly developed political sense and when she moved to London just before the Great War, she joined the Union for Women's Suffrage under Millicent Fawcett. Her later life was darkened by the loss of her lover and mental illness, culminating in her suicide in 1935. In some ways, her life echoes that of Menlove Edwards, also highly intelligent, also gay and also thwarted in unequal measures by his own inner demons, his obstinacy, and the rigidity of social attitudes. Du Faur could be obstinate too, turning her back on the Ladies' Alpine Club because she saw it as a compromise too far, despite the support it might have offered her. In a world as small as that of climbing, the political gains made by women in the early 20th century would take decades to filter through.

Of course, women's role, or lack of it, in mountaineering was, and is, so thoroughly influenced by social attitudes that it is hardly surprising they were largely absent from the scene for so long. Even when they arrived on the highest peaks of all, the stereotypical thinking endured. Walt Unsworth's exemplary history of Everest refers to Junko Tabei as the 'Japanese housewife' and later a 'bespectacled ex-schoolteacher from Tokyo'. Replace the word 'Tokyo' with the word 'Nottingham' and you have a fairly accurate description of Doug Scott.

Women nurture, they are coy, they are nest-builders. Men are the risk-takers, they are the ones who are out to impress with manly deeds like soloing gritstone slabs and hunting wildebeest. When women venture into the mountains, it is an eccentricity, their courage is remarked upon, as though it were the unlikeliest thing for a woman to show physical courage, and there is the constant subtext that any achievement is considered marvellous only insofar as it was done by a woman. 'If a bloke had done it,' men tell themselves, 'nobody would have been interested.' I want to give you an example of this, from the very start of women's mountaineering, the first female ascent of Mont Blanc.

There are myriad sources in English detailing the first ascent of Mont

Blanc in 1786, despite – or perhaps because of – the suppression of Michel-Gabriel Paccard's personal account and the heavyweight propaganda job done on Jacques Balmat by the jealous precentor, Marc-Théodore Bourrit and later on by Alexandre Dumas who interviewed Balmat in 1832 and whose fictitious, self-glorifying account could not be contradicted by Paccard, who had died several years earlier.

There are a number of books on this great achievement and the subsequent controversy, and Walt Unsworth gives it great attention in his history of Mont Blanc, *Savage Snows*. But to the first ascent by a woman, he gives only a few paragraphs. Nor is any other historian more generous, and there are all kinds of inconsistencies between their accounts. There is even disagreement on the date. Unsworth says 1808, others say 1809, some call her Marie Paradis, others Maria Paradis. Some say she was a serving girl, others that she ran a refreshment stall, or a café at her home in Les Pèlerins. I have read that she was even displayed at circuses as some kind of freakish exhibit. Her age is given variously as 18, 22 or 23 at the time of the ascent.

But one thing that all the accounts have in common is a dismissive tone about her climb, a description of how Paradis was dragged up the final slopes by her male guides, that she was in a semi-comatose state on the summit. It is also agreed that Maria – or Marie – chose not to describe her ascent beyond the briefest details on her return to Chamonix, inviting women of the village to go and do it themselves if they were that interested. And who took her on the ascent? Jacques Balmat, who had lied so aggressively about his role in the first ascent of the mountain a quarter of a century earlier. Among the accounts I've read in English of Maria's achievement, I prefer that by Charles Edward Mathews, alpinist, Brummie, friend of Joe Chamberlain and the first President of the Climbers' Club. It has the ring of truth and more detail than the dismissive accounts that have followed.

In 1809 a group of guides, led by Balmat, decide to make another ascent of Mont Blanc and as they are on the point of departure, two women, Euphrosine Ducroz and Maria Paradis, approach them and ask to go with them to the summit. Mathews says:

The guides would have nothing to say to Madame Ducroz, but Maria was unmarried and Jacques Balmat, taking her by both hands, asked her if she had really made up her mind. She said yes. "Well," he replied, "I am an old wolf of the mountains, and even I will not promise to succeed. All I ask of you is to be courageous." Maria clapped her hands with joy, and they all started together.

The climb goes well, but Maria, Mathews tells us, is exhausted. 'Go more slowly, Jacques, my heart fails me – go as if you were tired yourself.' Then two guides take her by the arms, and partly by pushing her, and partly by carrying her, they arrive at the Rochers Rouges. Here Maria begs to be left

behind, even thrown into a crevasse, but the guides continue to propel her upwards and so they continued to the summit. Mathews continues:

The following day on reaching Chamonix, all the women in the village came out to welcome the young adventuress, and to ask for details of the journey; but she replied she had seen so many things that it would take too long to recount them, and such of them as were very curious upon the subject could make the journey for themselves.

She did open up later, according to Mathews, telling Captain Markham Sherwill, who made an early British ascent, about her climb, and also entertaining Henriette d'Angeville 30 years later after she made the second ascent by a woman.

I say Mathews has the *ring* of truth, because he quotes his main source as being Alexandre Dumas' account of the conversation he had in 1832 with Jacques Balmat. Dumas got Balmat drunk, so much of this version could very well be the self-aggrandising fantasy of a man so mistrusted that rumours he was murdered have a credibility even before you hear the facts. 'An old wolf of the mountains' is how he describes himself to Maria, at least in his own account, a predator taking the young, innocent girl into danger. It's like Little Red Riding Hood set at altitude.

Maria was also ill-served by Henriette d'Angeville, who discounted the first female ascent of Mont Blanc to promote her own: 'When I went up Mont Blanc,' she wrote afterwards, 'it had not been ascended by any woman capable of remembering her impressions.' As an antidote to such an unsisterly assessment, I think of Claire Evans' withering description of d'Angeville as 'a spinster who loved Mont Blanc because she had nothing else to love' who suffered from a 'morbid passion for self-advertisement'.

Whatever the truth of Maria Paradis' climb, the context is clear. She only succeeded because there were men close at hand to help and the climb didn't count anyway because it was simply not tolerable that a serving girl with no real ambition or position in society should have the honour. But I want to suggest to you that despite her own admission, assuming that even this is true, that she had to be half-carried to the summit, Paradis' achievement is astonishing. *

This was quite possibly the first significant ascent by a woman anywhere, even before mountaineering as a sport had gathered momentum. There were no ropes, no specialist clothing of any description, no ice axes, just unwieldy alpenstocks, and little understanding of altitude sickness. Less than a quarter of a century before it had been widely believed that anyone

* Someone who has taken Maria Paradis seriously is the poet and novelist Alison Fell whose poem *Marie Paradis, maidservant* shows more imagination of her than the dismissive histories. 'On the summit her anger arches / like an arrow, sickening and falling // Let them spread their own napkins / on the folds of the snow ...'

who spent a night on a glacier would die. And she was a *woman*, perceived by men as inherently inferior. I think Maria Paradis deserves rather more attention than she's got up to now.

Of course, that was all a long time ago. It's a different world now. Although I remember a couple of years ago helping my two young children out of the car outside my flat in London in the middle of the afternoon during working hours and being approached by an Italian man in his early 50s, who smiled at me sadly and said: 'You know this is for women to do. Women look after children. Men work. It's the way.' So maybe things haven't changed that much. Junko Tabei is still described even now as the 'Japanese housewife', as though being a housewife was an easy day for a lady.

More than a year after the publication of *Regions of the Heart*, the biography of Alison Hargreaves that I co-authored with David Rose, I am still discovering responses to her death which make me think afresh about the fundamental instincts that underpin our society. I recently met Peach Weathers, wife of Beck Weathers, the man who rose from the dead on the South Col of Everest during that infamous spring season on Everest in 1996 so memorably described in Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air*. In the account of his survival, entitled *Left For Dead*, Peach writes:

While Beck was away, I watched a Channel 13 program about this Scotswoman who had died climbing in the mountains. Her husband later took their two children back to the Himalayas so they could see where their mother had died. I remember thinking at the time, Fat lot of good that's going to do them, telling a four-year-old and a two-year-old, "Mommy's up there in the clouds". I thought, That'll sure make them feel better. "Mommy was such a brave person." That's not going to help them when they fall down and skin their knees.

It seems a harsh assessment made worse by Peach Weathers not even bothering to find out the Scotswoman's name. But it is a judgement I have heard made more often than any other, and usually by women who instinctively avoid risk, who do not understand it, or even their own relationship to it. Because women do take risks, most unconsciously, some deliberately. Perhaps they do it less on the swell of testosterone that drives young men into dangerous situations, and with less bravado, but there is a commonality of motivation that overcomes the perceived differences in what is expected of us as men or women.

Alison did a number of remarkable things as a climber, making the first unsupported ascent of Everest without bottled oxygen being perhaps the most extraordinary. But there were other astonishing achievements, like her solo of the Croz Spur in winter conditions late in 1993 after her summer of soloing six north faces throughout the Alps. If you've ever done a north face like the Croz, even with a partner, then you will know viscerally that hollow, choked feeling you get as you cross the bergschrund, the

mountaineer's regular Rubicon, and set off into the night. That fear takes a lot of self-control to overcome.

I think the idea of a woman, especially a mother, taking risks invites the kind of stunted judgements that coloured male ideas about women not just in Lord Baden-Powell's day but in the 1970s when Alison started climbing. Wanda Rutkiewicz, in my opinion the best female high-altitude mountaineer in the sport's history, suffered in a similar way and, again like Alison, the true story of her life was more inspiring and more courageous than she was sometimes allowed after her death. When Wanda was a little girl, during the Easter holidays in 1948, she was playing with her brother and his friends in bombed-out ruins of an apartment block in her home town of Wroclaw. They found an unexploded landmine buried in the rubble and decided to set fire to it. And Wanda's brother also decided that his little sister, then only five years old, shouldn't be allowed to join in with the boys, so she ran home to tell her mother how she had been cruelly excluded from this new, exciting game. The mine exploded as Wanda's terrified mother sprinted towards the ruin. All the boys were killed.

Wanda's share of personal tragedy didn't end with her brother. Her father was brutally murdered in 1972 by his own tenants, in his own home. He had offered lodging to a couple and then come home to find them robbing him. They assaulted him with knives and an axe. Wanda had to identify the body. She would say afterwards that people frightened her. 'I'm forever scared that something terrible might happen to me,' she once said. In the same way that Alison would find release from her unhappy marriage in the mountains, Wanda found freedom there from the ghosts that haunted her.

Alison didn't know Wanda, although she knew her reputation. She did, however, know Catherine Freer. They met at an international women's meet and hit it off. Catherine inspired Alison, showed her a glimpse of an altogether different world. They stayed in touch and Alison found her presence in the world encouraging. When Catherine died on Mount Logan's Hummingbird Ridge in 1986, Alison was stricken with grief, in a way she couldn't have predicted. Freer was an exceptional woman and an inspiration to the small group of Canadian women following in her footsteps.

One of her friends told me recently: 'Catherine was a powerful presence in our community. For younger women like me she was a goddess. Beautiful and climbing totally hard. I wanted to be just like her. I was awestruck by her, she didn't seem wimpy in the way I saw myself. Her eyes burned with this Maurice Richard intensity. I think she turned grown men to jello.'

Catherine was a psychologist and worked for a while in a home for abused wives. One evening, a husband who'd found out where his wife was hiding called round with a handgun and loosed off a shot at Catherine. It could have killed her. But if she had died that night, no obituarist would have dared suggest that she had died doing something useless, that she died pursuing her own selfish ends. And yet, climbing gave her a dimension she lacked before, or at least, helped her realise herself as an individual.

You could argue that she was a better psychologist, that she might have been a better mother, had she lived to bear children, because of that.

'You don't appreciate the full flavour of life until you risk losing it,' Wanda Rutkiewicz said once, and the obvious answer to that is that most of us know just how risky life is without leaving the ground, thank you very much. There is nothing heroic or glorious about dying in a mountaineering accident. But had Alison, like Cathy Freer, been killed anywhere but a mountain, then that side of her life would have been celebrated. There would have been no avalanche of criticism and moral judgements.

Of course, Alison had marital difficulties of her own although almost no one who heard of her death in August 1995 had any idea quite how much she had suffered. She had started climbing in a very male, very competitive English climbing scene where the last thing you did was reveal yourself or your emotions. But at the same time she felt unequal to the image she presented to the world. She often over-compensated for her lack of confidence, appearing brittle or ungenerous to her competitors. Plenty of people thought her selfish and self-obsessed. Cathy Freer, by contrast, was living her ambition and her fears out in the open; I think Alison envied that and while Cathy was around, she had a role model.

As she got older, and her climbing successes diluted her need to prove something to the world, then a different Alison began emerging. For much of her relationship with Jim Ballard, she had tried to conform to some kind of Baden-Powell notion of a good wife. (She was certainly organised enough when camping.) But there were times when she felt reduced, even crushed, and this led to disillusionment and bitterness. And she was alone with that, through fear mostly, much of it fear of failure, of admitting that she had been wrong about her marriage and the direction her life was taking.

Women like Alison Hargreaves and the others who dominated women's mountaineering in the 1980s and 1990s don't deserve that dismissive sneering challenge that what they did wasn't cutting-edge or innovative. Because, as Maria Paradis, cheated by history, might tell you, it was. 'Women are not only more grateful than men, but their character shapes itself according as it is led by their man,' Baden-Powell told his young readers. We laugh, we dismiss it, but the attitude was real, and I suspect still is for some men. Freda Du Faur, Alison Hargreaves, Wanda Rutkiewicz, Catherine Freer and others were the women who broke through these barriers. They were innovators for a future generation not by finding new routes in the mountains, but by finding new routes for themselves, by shaping their own characters. Most women don't climb mountains, most don't even understand climbing's appeal, but I think, in that regard at least, most women would sympathise with women mountaineers.

Further reading: *Wanda Rutkiewicz - A Caravan of Dreams* by Gertrude Reinisch (Carreg, 2000). *Between Heaven and Earth. The Life of A Mountaineer*, *Freda Du Faur* by Sally Irwin (White Crane Press, 2000).