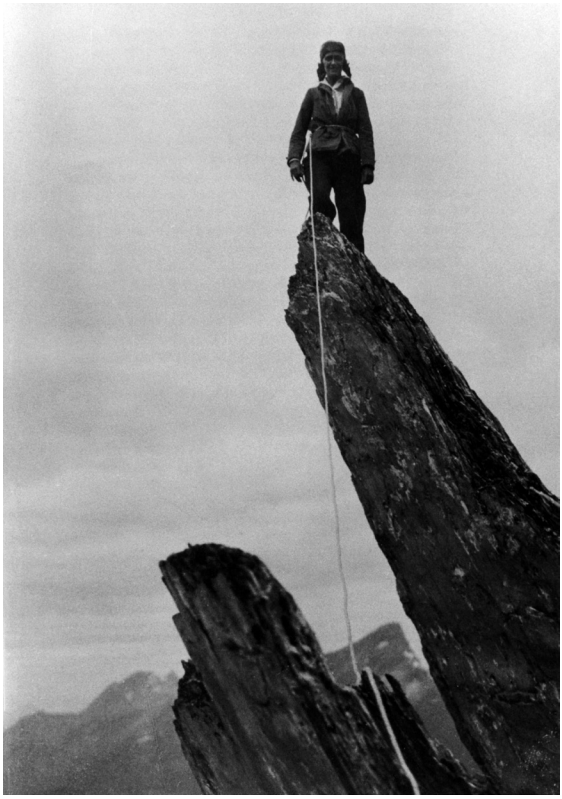
JOHN MIDDENDORF

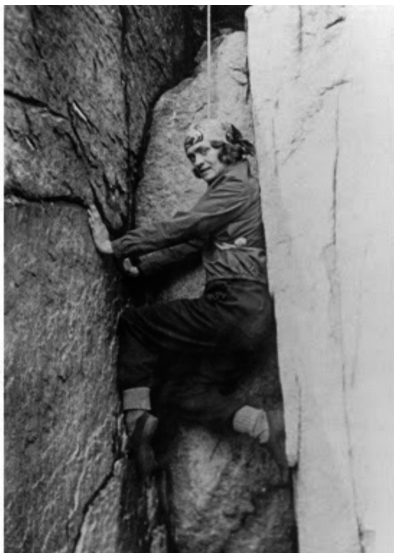
# ‘A Delicate Sense of Balance’

## How Miriam O’Brien Inspired America



Miriam O’Brien on a gendarme in the Mittelgruppe of the Engelhörner, taken from her book *Give Me the Hills*. A member of the Ladies’ Alpine Club, she was among a significant group who resigned their membership when women were admitted to the Alpine Club. *(Adolph Rubi)*

Before and after the First World War, there were a significant number of women climbing at a high standard in the Dolomites. Dutchwoman Jeanne Immink, for example, whose brief, five-year climbing career included the second ascent of the *Schmitt Chimney* on the Fünffingerspitze, despite its originator Robert Hans Schmitt predicting it would never see a repeat. ‘I challenge the male mountaineers to follow in my steps,’ she once said.

Gertrude Bell, left, was an early inspiration to Miriam O'Brien. Bell's attempt on the Finsteraarhorn had impressed O'Brien but her own experience on the mountain was harrowing. With Adolf Rubi she made the third ascent in 1930 in a 20-hour round-trip, climbing steep rock in mitts and overcoming phenomenal challenges of route finding and loose rock. In *Give Me the Hills*, she titled her report of this climb, 'the only grim chapter'.

There were the Slovenians Pavla Jesih and Dana Kuraltova, who made the first all-female ascent of the north face of Triglav in 1925. (Jesih's career was ended by a 100ft fall in 1933.) Or the Austrian Irma Glaser who in 1911 shared the first ascent of the spectacular Piaz ridge on Delago Tower, westernmost of the Vajolet Towers, with Giovanni Battista Piaz and the guide and hut guardian Jori Francesco.

In 1903, Vineta Mayer, who was born in Trieste the year Whymper climbed the Matterhorn, made the first female ascent of the Campanile Basso. (She would die by her own hand in 1945 as the Russians approached her home city of Vienna.) Ilona and Rolanda Eötvös were the two surviving daughters of the Hungarian physicist Loránd Eötvös. The fact they were often guided by Antonio Dibona, along with the family's wealth, meant their achievements were often unfairly discounted. Yet the number and quality of their first ascents, including, in 1901, the south face of Tofana di Rozes, one of the classic south facing routes in the Dolomites, speaks for itself, and they were among the first women to climb together guideless. Käthe Bröske was born in 1870 into an ethnically German family in what is now the Russian city of Volgograd but later moved to the Polish Tatras with her husband, a keen alpinist. She climbed in the Dolomites too, making the traverse of the Vajolet Towers with Tito Piaz. I haven't yet needed to mention more familiar names from that era, like Mira Debelak, Paula Weisinger and Mary Varale.

CLUB ALPINO ITALIANO

RIVISTA MENSILE

Luglio-Agosto 1928

DUE NUOVI ITINERARI
SULLA TORRE GRANDE D'AVERAU

I. - VIA MIRIAM.

Dietro il Rifugio Cinque Torri, nei pressi di Cortina d'Ampezzo, sorge la Torre Grande, la salita (la prima fatta da turisti). Noi ci trovavamo a Cortina da qualche giorno ed avevamo fatto una sola scalata d'allenamento, preparazione alquanto inadeguata per un'impresa tanto difficile; ciò non pertanto eravamo molto ansiose di accingerci all'impresa al più presto possibile.

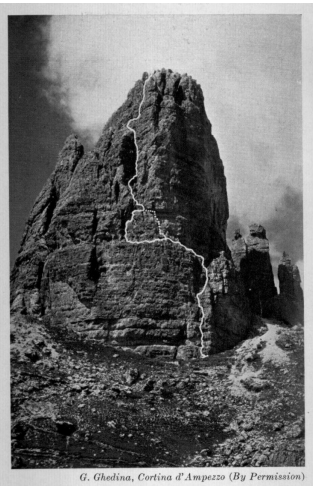
Il punto d'attacco si trova in quella parte della base ove le rocce raggiungono il livello più basso, e precisamente dietro ed a circa dieci minuti dal Rifugio Cinque Torri del C. A. I. La prima parte è costituita da una ripida parete che richiede per circa 30 metri uno sforzo continuo ed ininterrotto, sorpresa alquanto brusca per dei muscoli abituati alla vita comoda e molle delle città. A metà strada c'è un passaggio veramente difficile: uno sbalzo di rocce rosse che bisogna superare. Un passo a sinistra rende il problema meno arduo. Sorpassate le rocce rosse c'imbattiamo in un crepaccio di tre o quattro metri, ancora un passo a sinistra e la prima parte dell'ascensione è quasi finita potendoci portare un poco più avanti per una parete liscia che offre alcuni appigli. Sulla sommità c'è un appiglio per legarvi la corda, piccolo ma sufficiente; alcuni passi ancora in su ed eccoci ad una cava: eccellente osservatorio per riposarsi e per osservare le acrobazie degli altri compagni.

Un piccolo crepaccio non molto difficile, che si trova al dissopra della cava, ci guida per circa 8 metri ad un sito ameno e dominante con uno sbalzo di roccia in alto e, per quanto il nostro sguardo potesse abbracciare, con una parete levigata a destra. Quivi giunti, l'unica

(Fot. E. Y. O' Brien).

TORRE GRANDE D'AVERAU.

..... Via Versante Nuvolau (comune).
------ Variante Angelini Sperti.
- - - - - Via Miriam.



*G. Ghedina, Cortina d'Ampezzo (By Permission)*

TORRE GRANDE OF CINQUE TORRI
South Wall, "Via Miriam"
(See page 165ff.)

Report in the Club Alpino Italiano's *Rivista Mensile* on the first ascent of the *Via Miriam*, on the Cinque Torri's Torre Grande. The route became a European rock climbing test-piece for the East Coast Appalachian Mountain Club (AMC) members. Elizabeth Knowlton climbed it with the Dimai brothers in 1928.

Among English-speaking climbers the better-known leading women were more often from the French and Swiss Alps, like Marie Marvingt[1] before the Great War and after it Micheline Morin and Alice Damesme, who with Nea Morin, Micheline's sister-in-law, made the first all-female traverse of the La Meije in 1933, and Hettie Dyrhenfurth, who went to Kangchenjunga in 1930 with her husband Günter and Frank Smythe.

There wasn't as much written in English alpine journals about female pioneers in the Dolomites and few clubs kept eastern Alpine journals in their libraries. Nevertheless, Miriam O'Brien, in the 1920s one of America's leading female climbers, was inspired by one of those Dolomites pioneers, a pre-Great War alpinist familiar with the potential of the 'special techniques' developed in the Eastern Alps, one of those extraordinary women pushing the boundaries of convention on the most feared rock climbs of the Alps: Gertrude Bell.

Bell's reputation rests on her extraordinary diplomatic career but in her short climbing life (1899-1904) she amassed a phenomenal list of climbing accomplishments, still enviable decades later. Among her visionary projects was an improbable line up the steep, knife-blade north-east rib of the

1. Some of these pioneering women were not just climbers but excelled in other spheres. Pavla Jesih, after her career-ending fall, became a movie-theatre impresario in Yugoslavia. Marie Marvingt became famous as an aviatrix, flying combat missions in the First World War and developing the idea of air ambulances. She tried to enter the Tour de France but was barred for being a woman. She rode anyway, a little behind the official race, and finished, unlike most of the men who competed. In the Second World War she worked in the resistance and was awarded the Croix de Guerre.

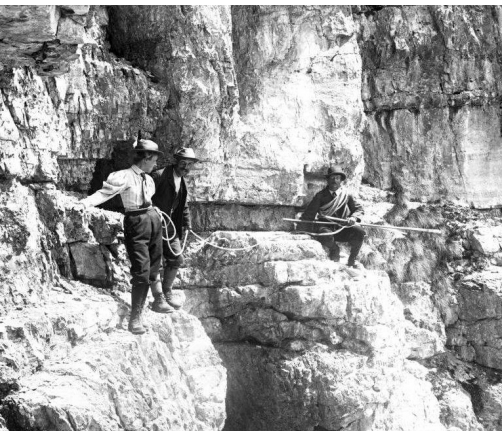
Finsteraarhorn, the most prominent peak in Switzerland. Her 1902 attempt on this elegant route ended short of the summit and their descent became the epic tale of that era, as bad weather set in at a particularly perilous section of tenuous route finding. Bell and her guides Ulrich and Heinrich Fuhrer spent two days retreating through avalanches and desperate bivouacs, managing endless rappels with frostbitten hands and feet. Only through incredible teamwork, courage and perseverance did the team survive. When this route was eventually climbed in 1904, it established new levels of commitment on long alpine rock routes. (See 'The Other Gertrude Bell', *AJ* 2020, pp168-78).

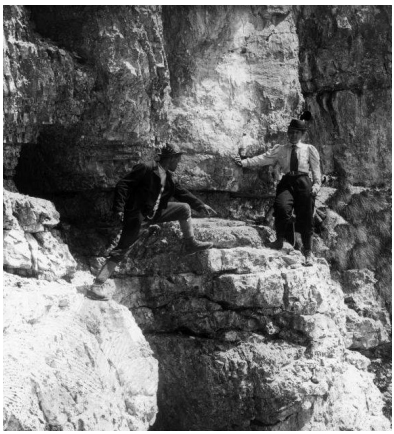
Many of Bell's more difficult climbs were made possible with state-of-the-art tools becoming available at the time in the Eastern Alps. In her journals, she writes of some training routes:

> *BERNER OBERLAND August, 1901: Yesterday my guides and I were up at 4 and clambered up on to the Engelhorn range to take a good look round and see what was to be done. It was the greatest fun, very difficult rock work, but all quite short. We hammered in nails and slung ropes and cut rock steps – mountaineering in miniature. Finally we made a small peak that had not been done before, built a cairn on it and solemnly christened it. Then we explored some very difficult rock couloirs, found the way up another peak which we are going to do one of these days. … I shall probably stay here till Sunday morning which will give the snow time to get right. Then I shall return to my great schemes...*[2]

Miriam became serious about her alpinism in 1926, the year Gertrude Bell died two days short of her 58th birthday, from an overdose of sleeping pills. Bell's line on the Finsteraarhorn, only repeated once since its first ascent, would become a major objective for the American climber Miriam O'Brien. In 1931 she reflected on Gertrude Bell's great schemes in an *American Alpine Journal* essay 'On Some of Gertrude Bell's Routes in the Oberland', a tribute that revealed her own focus on steep and visionary new rock climbs. In previous eras, mountaineers were often modest in their published reports; some were reluctant to make any claim at all, as in the case of the talented Benedikt sisters, Elly and Karin, who roped up with Conrad Kain. Miriam's eight-page article on Bell, on the other hand, dispenses with modesty and explains the raw commitment and severe challenges Gertrude Bell overcame, based on her own experiences and successes on the hardest test-pieces of the day. In the late 1920s and 1930s Miriam became a leading climber among a group of East Coast American rock climbers that included several talented women: Margaret Mason Helburn, Elizabeth Knowlton, Marjorie Hurd, Betty Woolsey, Florence Peabody, Winifred Marples, Julia and Julia

2. There are several other references to Gertrude Bell's use of pitons (then known as 'nails'), notably in 1902 on the Wellhorn, where she succeeded only 'with the aid of an iron nail driven in the worst place and of a double rope.' Miriam O'Brien wrote of this: 'At that time, apparently, pitons were not so much in disfavour with English Climbers as they later became!' (*Give Me the Hills*, 1957). Regarding 'cutting rock steps', note that sculpting hand and foot-holds in rock with a hammer (or ice axe) was a tolerated technique well into the 1930s (see Rudatis, 1931).





Ilona Eötvös (1880-1945) in the Dolomites. She and her sister Rolanda (1878-1953), pictured right, were introduced to alpinism by their father, the Hungarian physicist and politician Loránd Eötvös and were dubbed the 'Hungarian baronesses' for their ability to hire top guides like Angelo Dibona and Antonio Dimai. Despite the criticism, they were dedicated and capable alpinists.

Colt (mother and daughter), and Jesse Whitehead, a Briton who moved to the USA in 1925.

Precisely when and where Miriam O'Brien was born is surprisingly uncertain. Writing Miriam's obituary for the *American Alpine Journal*, her friend Marjorie Hurd claimed Lisbon, New Hampshire as her birthplace in 1899. Hints in her memoir *Give Me the Hills* and other sources suggest the year may have been 1898. Other sources suggest Forest Glen, Maryland as her birthplace. The confusion is understandable. In the late 1890s, her father Robert Lincoln O'Brien was working as Washington correspondent for a Boston newspaper, the *Boston Evening Transcript*[3]. He would later edit that newspaper before moving to the *Boston Herald*. After that, from the early 1930s, he served in Herbert Hoover's administration as chair of the US Tariff Commission, continuing in post when Franklin Roosevelt was elected.

If anything, Miriam's mother Emily Young O'Brien was more notable. (Her father was a merchant in Lisbon, New Hampshire, and she may have chosen to return there to have her first child.) Despite becoming a mother in her early twenties, Emily continued with her ambition to become a doctor, despite the hurdles placed in her path by the male establishment. While living in Washington, she campaigned with other notable suffragists Ellen Spencer Mussey and Alice Stern Gitterman to establish a juvenile court, which was passed into law in 1906. During the Great War she worked with conscripts and was later head of the Disabled Veterans' Hospital Services. She was a dedicated mountaineer and later in life, at the aged of 59, traversed the Grépon and at 63 did the Jungfrau, Mönch and Wetterhorn.

3. T S Eliot wrote a poem titled 'Boston Evening Transcript', *Poetry*, vol VII no 1, October 1915, p21.

Emily made sure to take her two young children on her adventures. In *Give Me the Hills*, published first in Britain in 1956, Miriam begins with memories of a family trip into 'a remote wilderness region of New Hampshire', recollecting how 'I got there my first taste of the wild, uncrowded places of the earth, and even at six years old, I liked it.' In 1914, Emily took Miriam and her younger brother Lincoln to Europe, where Miriam and her mother climbed up to the Brévent while in Chamonix. Soon after, while in a remote mountain town in Switzerland, war broke out and Miriam witnessed the mobilisation of all able-bodied Swiss men heading to the mountains with 'rucksack, climbing rope, ice-axe, and heavy nailed boots'. They had time to look round the Zermatt mountains before a much-interrupted train journey back to Paris, where they witnessed 'refugees pouring out of the city, and we seemed to be alone in wanting to go in.' Eventually the trio made it safely back to America but for all the O'Briens, their first trip to Europe and the taste of being in the mountains would lead to a lifelong pursuit of mountain adventures.

Miriam first roped up in 1920 on the Grand Muveran during one of her annual summer family vacations in Switzerland. She loved this moment and each summer returned to the mountains. In a hut, she met George Finch, who suggested she not waste time on trivial routes. 'You can do the Matterhorn,' he told her. Why not, she agreed. On local Boston crags and later on climbing trips to the American West, she discovered a natural affinity for balance climbing on steep rock. In March 1926, she joined Margaret Helburn on a winter road-trip with the 'Bemis Crew', a group of hard-core alpinists and rock climbers within the Appalachian Mountain Club. The trip cumulated with steep rock climbs on 'the walls of the cirques of Katahdin', the highest mountain in Maine. Inspired by the steep unclimbed rock walls, a few months later, she travelled to the Dolomites, looking to engage the 'right' guides to learn the craft. She wrote in her autobiography:

> *Rock climbing was what I wanted. I would start in the Dolomites and later go on to Chamonix and its granite aiguilles. … In common with many women, I felt that these Dolomites were made just to suit me with their small but excellent toe- and finger-holds, and pitches where a delicate sense of balance was the key, rather than brute force. While it helps of course to have tough muscles, the prizefighter would not necessarily make a fine Dolomite climber. But the ballet dancer might.*

Miriam proved herself a prima ballerina on rock. In a few prolific Alpine seasons between 1926 and 1928 she graduated to leading top-level climbs, becoming well known on both sides of the pond. In her first year, after a few training routes, she climbed the Punta Fiames by the *Spigolo*, the futuristic 400m line that follows a bold arête, established by Käthe Bröske and Francesco Jori in 1909. Her understated report in *Appalachia* ('Notes on Three Dolomite Climbs', 1926), notes how her guide, Angelo Dimai, led a difficult pitch with only a small fish line attached, as 'the weight of the regular rope


Left: the brilliant Slovenian alpinist and entrepreneur Pavla Jesih (1901-76), who suffered a serious accident in 1933 that ended her climbing career. She went on to own and run cinemas. Right: the famous Italian inter-war alpinist Mary Varale (1895-1963), who climbed with Comici and Cassin but denounced the CAI as 'hypocrites and buffoons' for overlooking the ability of female alpinists, resigning from the club in 1935.

would be enough to upset his balance and pull him over backwards.' Though Miriam was second on the rope, this climb would have been considered harder than any of the long rock climbs in Colorado at the time, such as *Crestone Needle* or *Alexanders Chimney*, and thus harder than anything in America. Miriam would soon be leading routes of this difficulty.

She reported no pitons on the *Spigolo* in 1926 but in the following years many were added, some by none other than Angelo Dimai, who later repeated the route with Albert I of Belgium. Miriam recounted Angelo's explanation of the extra pegs.

> *'I put most of those in myself,' said Angelo, 'when I took King Albert of the Belgians up this climb. It wouldn't do, you know, to have any accident happen to the King … Of course, when it's only you,' he added quickly with the customary twinkle in his eye, 'it wouldn't matter.'*[4]

In 1927, her second Dolomite season, Miriam's first route was 'one of the most difficult in the whole Dolomite region', the south wall of Torre Grande in the Cinque Torri, a guided climb with her partner Margaret Helburn. This was a state-of-the-art route, with piton belays and anchors strategically placed for the V+ free climbing: the top of the free climbing scale. Their guides were the father and son team of Antonio and Angelo Dimai. Antonio's two sons, Angelo and Guiseppe, and the Cortina guide Arturo Gasperi had

4. M Underhill, *Give Me the Hills*, Methuen, London, 1956.

previously climbed and pre-equipped the route with strategically placed pitons in preparation for Miriam's arrival that season and honoured her by naming the climb the *Via Miriam*. A week later, Miriam and the team climbed it in three and a half hours, falling a few times and weighting a piton at one point, and later devoting three gripping pages of detail about the difficulties in her autobiography.

In Italy, the route was news and a feature article by Miriam appeared in the 1928 *Rivista Mensile*, the journal of the Italian Alpine Club. In Britain, the route was controversial. The style of *Via Miriam* was considered in the 1933 edition of the *Alpine Journal* as 'facilitated' by ironmongery, the correspondent claiming that the modern guide's 'mountaineering' skills had been replaced by piton-protected 'acrobatism', considered 'more or less *unjustifiable*'. In contrast with the honoured Antonio Dimai, who reportedly only used pitons for belays in his long career and was described by E L Strutt in 1941 as 'the finest cragsman in the Eastern Alps', the *Alpine Journal's* consideration of Antonio's avant-garde sons was less flattering. They 'inherited their father's skill' but failed to inherit 'all of his methods'.

Miriam had no such qualms about the new methods, at least then, and throughout her life she was proud of the route named in her honour. For Miriam, it was her first direct exposure to the techniques that would soon enable the rise in big-wall standards in America. Her complex relationship with the ethics of pitons, which she frequently shared in her writings, also begins.

Miriam's relationship with tools was complex; in her writings, she frequently made attempts to explain what she termed the 'morality' of pitons: the line of acceptable use as they became adopted during her career as a climber. Of her early days (pre-1928), she writes of a climb that went awry: 'Not one of us in those days would have stooped to carry a piton.' Yet as we've seen, she had already climbed some very difficult piton-protected routes with guides by that time. Climbing without 'artificial aids' was the goal, and big routes like the north wall of Cima Una, an 800m route which she climbed with Antonio Dimai in seven hours in 1928, were climbed piton-free; she laments how subsequent climbers added many 'unnecessary' pitons, and ponders the balance between risk and skill, a central theme in all realms of climbing. In her later years, she wrote:

> *But the piton for security is something else. We have all heard younger climbers tell us, with impatience, that they do not use pitons to help them get up, but merely to make the climb safe, and that it is exactly the same climb it was before, only safer. It most definitely is not the same climb. These modern climbers are getting from their pitons enormous help without admitting or, perhaps, even realizing its extent. And in this, to my mind, lies the more questionable ethics of the piton.*[5]

5. M O'Brien Underhill, *'Ironmongery Then and Now', Yearbook of the Ladies'* Alpine Club, London, 1957.

In the 1950s, when she wrote this, America was undergoing a big shift in technological climbing. Reusable chromoly steel pitons were coming online, allowing a smaller rack for bigger climbs; big walls like El Capitan were being considered. 'I have no quarrel whatever with direct-aid pitons,' she wrote; her concern was for the adventure lost on overly protected free climbs:

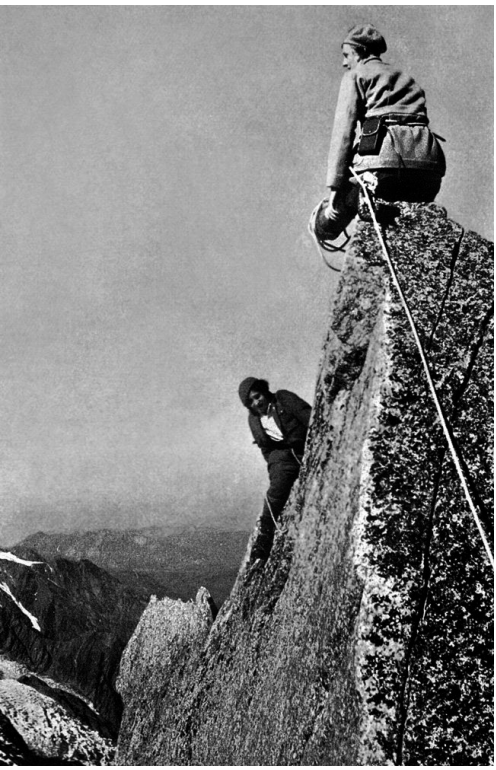
> *It is not the same climb [with more pitons], because the piton removes or greatly mitigates the penalty for failure. … For even if the modern climber never needs to use these pitons, they are there, removing from his mind a great weight of responsibility.*[6]

Yet in her early days, Miriam's attitude toward pitons was softer. In 1931, she recognised the standards of difficulty were higher than in the 1920s due to 'recent developments in rock climbing technique and skill' and wrote: 'The raising over the years of standards of difficulty is due in large measure to the use of improved equipment, and particularly of pitons.' This was a period of rapid expansion of piton-protected climbs in Europe, which was followed by a similar wave in America a few years later. She comments on how Armand Charlet, a critic of pitons except for roping down, had no qualms about leaving his jammed ice axe in cracks to protect difficult sections. 'Morally, I see little difference between using a piton and jamming in the ice axe.'

It was not just hardware that Miriam adopted as she became America's leading rock climbing maestro. She learned from the best and developed a holistic understanding of the new climbing systems. Of potentially catching a fall on a climb in France in 1926, she wrote, 'the chief rule is: don't try to stop the fall abruptly but let the rope run a bit and brake it gradually,' perhaps the most succinct explanation of a dynamic belay until Richard Leonard's analysis in 'Values to be Derived from Local Rock Climbing' in the June 1934 *Sierra Club Bulletin*, then to a larger audience in 1946, in his more widely read book, *Belaying the Leader* (1946). Miriam also developed nuanced skills in the use of karabiners and slings, as evidenced by the impeccable teamwork with her partners, especially on her efficient all-female alpine ascents. She understood the advantages of longer ropes, sometimes equipping herself with 150ft ropes for certain climbs at a time when 120ft ropes were standard. And she was an expert in rock-climbing footwear, the *scarpa da gatto*: shoes with layers of woollen cloth ('best when old and therefore well-conditioned' but which only lasted a dozen climbs), and the trade-offs with the rubber soles of sneakers also becoming popular around this time.

After each summer season in the Alps, Miriam would bring all this knowledge and information back to the many local crags of the East Coast, where, almost certainly, these new techniques were first practised in the USA. But it was her on-and-off early climbing partner and future husband

6. Ibid.



Alice Damesme (1894-1974) and Nea Morin (1905-86) on the summit of the Aiguille de Blaitière in 1934. Together with Nea's sister-in-law Micheline Morin, the pair were pioneers in 'manless' climbing. *(Micheline Morin)*

Robert Underhill, who would in the early 1930s become the main spokesperson for these new tools and techniques, despite the breadth and depth of his experience on cutting-edge routes in the Alps being much more limited than Miriam's. In this early period, at the height of her rock-climbing career, Miriam was content as a writer to focus on her experiences and avoid the ethical dilemmas that came with exposing the new tools and techniques.

That wasn't true of her husband. As chair of the rock climbing committee of the Appalachian Mountain Club, Robert Underhill published a piece in the *Sierra Club Bulletin* in 1931 entitled 'On the Use and Management of the Rope in Rock Work'. This seminal piece is recognised as the article that created a leap in climbing standards and styles in the USA. It was not that he invented the techniques he described. In fact, his contribution was offering the first explanation in English of the more complex rope techniques that had been developed in the Eastern Alps in the previous three decades. But the timing and information presented in his illustrated 24-page article created a new general awareness of rope-work and exposed new realms of vertical rock that could be climbed with reasonable safeguards, given that Underhill was also an early proponent of the use of pitons as protection for lead climbs. The article and research in the journals provided an advancement in shared climbing knowledge that surpassed G W Young's *Mountain Craft*, then considered the best and most complete instructional book in English. It's worth asking the question: how much of this shared knowledge was gleaned from Miriam?

She continued to develop her skills with Angelo Dimai for many years, often leading crux pitches on routes new to both her and him. A guide letting a client lead was rare: Antonio Dimai would always climb first but, Miriam wrote, 'with Angelo I could lead all I liked, just so long as we were out of sight of his father.' They shared some epic adventures like Miriam's attempt with Angelo on the *Fehrmann* route on Campanile Basso, where they had

to sit out a gusting sleet storm on a six-inch ledge. The full range of her climbing experience is still not properly appreciated. In 1931 she published, in the *Canadian Alpine Journal*, one of her best articles, entitled 'European Rock Climbing', the best overview of continental rock-climbing areas to appear in English up to that point. She details objectives in the Dolomites, the Kaisergebirge, the Engelhörner, Bregaglia, Chamonix, Courmayeur, the Dauphiné, Valais and Swiss Oberland, as well as references to bouldering at Fontainebleau, which she visited in the winter of 1928-9. ('The most astonishing feats are performed on the twenty or thirty centers in the Forest.') She hadn't yet visited all these places: the Kaisergebirge for example. But she had plans to and most likely did. It's frustrating that we don't have a full account of her climbing record.

In the Western Alps we know she made all-female first ascents of the Matterhorn, Jungfrau and Mönch, as well as endurance traverses. Yet Miriam got most attention climbing rock test-pieces like the Grépon multiple times and by various routes, including her famous 'manless' ascent in 1929 with Jesse Whitehead and Alice Damesme, who led the Mummery crack on that occasion. Though by no means her hardest climb, this ascent got global attention when her account of manless climbing was published in the August 1934 edition of *National Geographic*.[7]

> *The essence of guideless climbing consists in taking, oneself, the entire responsibility for carrying the climb through to a successful finish. This is a lot of fun, and I saw no reason why this pleasure should be closed to women, although some of my friends among the French men mountaineers tried patiently to explain to me why it was theoretically impossible for a woman to lead a mountain climb taking the entire responsibility herself without at least masculine 'moral support'.*[8]

Her growing ability had fuelled her guideless – and manless – climbing ambitions and she consequently became known for decades afterwards as 'America's foremost woman climber', still noted as such in the March 1961 edition of *Summit* magazine.[9]

In her seasons on the Chamonix Aiguilles, Miriam was no less accomplished than she had been in the Dolomites, climbing many of the hardest alpine and rock routes in the Mont Blanc range. In 1926, she began with moderate guideless climbing with her brother Lincoln, eight years her junior, and others, noting that she 'planned soon to do more and on a bigger scale'. In France, she also found the right guide for her progression, Alfred Couttet, one of the

7. M O'Brien Underhill, 'Manless Alpine Climbing: The First Woman to Scale the Grépon, the Matterhorn, and Other Famous Peaks Without Masculine Support Relates Her Adventures', The National Geographic Magazine, vol LXVI No2, Washington, August 1934.
8. While Miriam was trying to make a serious point, and I love what she wrote, the editors framed the piece in cutesy, sexist terms with captions like this: 'A strong wind bothers a lady, though she has no skirt to worry about.' Such captions must stand for the regular drumbeat of patronising comments that often prevailed in the media about women's climbs in that era.
9. Not all women climbers approved. O'Brien recalled in the Ladies' Alpine Club *Yearbook* how at Zermatt 'one of the officers of the LAC took me aside and said, with some embarrassment, but still doing her duty as she felt she should: "I feel I must tell you that the Ladies' Alpine Club does not approve of manless climbing."'

first French guides to adopt pitons for harder routes. 'Couttet was using pitons, and using them skilfully. But at the time he wished it kept a secret!' she wrote. Couttet also broke guiding convention by seconding Miriam's leads on hard climbs. In their second season together they climbed a long new route on the Aiguille de Roc that involved 12 rappels to descend; it was an auspicious start to Miriam's expansive repertoire of hard climbs in the Alps with and without guides, and many with other top women climbers of the day.

In 1928, Miriam climbed all five pinnacles of the Aiguilles du Diable with Robert Underhill and guides Armand Charlet and Georges Cachet. Reading typical climbing histories, you might conclude that the Aiguilles du Diable traverse was Miriam's most significant climb. I would disagree. It might make her top 10, but while the route has some very technical sections it was not on the same scale as some of her climbs. What we can say, though, is that it was most likely the hardest climb her future husband Robert Underhill[10] achieved in the Alps. Simply put, there's a persuasive argument Miriam was the better climber.

By 1930, Miriam was ready for her hardest climbs yet, long alpine rock routes in the Swiss Bernese Oberland following in the footsteps of her inspiration Gertrude Bell. After a 19-hour ascent of the Dreieckhorn, she wrote, 'Why not repeat some more of her climbs, so engagingly described in *The Letters of Gertrude Bell*?' She found yet another guide, Alfred Rubi, who did not mind being second on the rope, and she often lead every pitch on long climbs of 'great endurance and fortitude'. 'I enjoyed climbing rapidly,' she reflected in her autobiography and indeed, many of her climbs broke records for the shortest time, a big advantage in the wild mountains where sudden weather changes are deadly. In succession, she climbed the Engelhörner and Wellingrat, and made the third ascent of the north-east ridge of the Finsteraarhorn, which the previous ascensionists had noted would always require a bivouac.[11] She and Rubi, with Rubi's younger brother Fritz as porter, climbed the 1,000m route in 13 hours with a seven-hour descent, the first one-day ascent of this spectacular line. Of Miriam's most impressive climbs, many were at a level of commitment that would have been the career best for most climbers of her day, male or female.

Miriam had her first child in 1936 but climbed throughout her whole life, with many productive trips to Europe and the American West, including new routes in Idaho's the Sawtooths and the Beartooths and Mission Ranges

10. In 1983, the American Alpine Club named their most prestigious annual climbing award for Miriam and Robert Underhill, given 'for the highest level of skill in mountaineering through the application of skill, courage, and perseverance'. In 2022, the AAC announced it would rename the award after letters emerged in which Robert Underhill expressed anti-semitic views, even after the Second World War, when the horror of Nazi Germany's crimes against humanity were widely understood. Miriam Underhill's name was also removed from the award, despite the allegation only being made against her husband.
11. The experience was not one Miriam enjoyed. 'Even today,' she wrote in her 1956 memoir, 'the climb remains a very unpleasant memory. It is the only climb I have ever done which I cannot think about with pleasure. Not that this was the only occasion in the mountains when I have ever been frightened, but it was the occasion when I was most badly frightened, and for the longest period. I may as well admit that I haven't the kind of courage it takes to do such climbs as that. Fun, to my mind, is the only reason for climbing mountains, and the North-east face of the Finsteraarhorn was not fun.'

in Montana. She also became an expert skier. In her obituary for Miriam, Marjorie Hurd was at pains to say there was a lot more to her than her mountaineering. Perhaps her greatest achievement, with her manless climbing, was to break the glass ceiling that women weren't leaders. As Janet Adam Smith put it, while reviewing Miriam's memoirs, her 'traverses were a notable landmark in women's progress from being regarded as a special kind of mountaineer, who was to be praised for expeditions that would cause no comment if made by men, to being judged on their own merits as mountaineers pure and simple. As happened also in many other fields of women's rights, it was only through a display of feminism that masculine bias could be counterweighed, and a right balance attained.'

For Miriam, breaking the male hegemony on leading was key because it was in leading that the deepest rewards of alpinism lay. 'Very early, I realized,' she wrote in her famous article about manless climbing, 'that the person who invariably climbs behind a good leader ... may never really learn mountaineering at all and in any case enjoys only part of the varied delights and rewards of climbing.'