

# Thinking Mountains:

## An Interdisciplinary Initiative

By Niall Fink



The evening of May 5th, while results poured in across the province and a new premier prepared her victory speech, one-hundred-and-twenty people from as far away as Tajikistan and New Zealand packed a conference room in Jasper and shut off their phones. They had gathered on Treaty 8 territory to think mountains. Elder Emil Moberly spoke the blessing, commencing the second “Thinking Mountains” conference. The moniker is inspired by Robert Bateman, who delivered the inaugural keynote at the first conference in 2012. Bateman explored what “thinking like a mountain” means in a future that would have been difficult for Aldo Leopold to conceive of when he coined the phrase in 1949. “Mountains are at the centre of many of the most pressing issues concerning the environment and sustainability,” says Stephen Slemon, a professor of English and one of the conference’s key organizers.

Spread over four days, *Thinking Mountains* 2015 featured more than one hundred presentations, workshops, and plenaries on subjects ranging from numerical

modeling of glacial mass to the Bloomsbury aesthetic of George Mallory, the Everest hero who famously declined to explain his attraction to the mountain with an infinitely quotable answer: “Because it’s there.” No question got off quite so easily at the conference. Dozens of papers on class, masculinity, postcolonial politics, the history of science, and mountain aesthetics made a very compelling case that no mountain is ever just “there”—and, as many at the conference would be quick to point out, it is doubtful that Mallory even gave this answer anyway. Mountains are far from simple.

The range of perspectives was extraordinary. At a packed plenary on the second morning, glaciologist Jeffrey Kavanaugh painted an alarming picture of glacial retreat and rising sea levels in the coming century; an entire session was devoted to the projected and current impacts of retreating glaciers on ecosystems and human communities. Other presentations explored how citizen science created the discipline that gives us these models; still others, the emergence of a fascination with glaciers as more than just “remote oddities with little geological significance.” In Thomas Wharton’s novel *Icefields*, a fictional glacier retreats across the novel, shaping human dramas and histories with its movement.

“Interdisciplinary collaboration enriches my own scholarship,” explains ecology professor David Hik, who, like Slemon, was key in conceiving and developing the event. For two decades, Hik has helped bring “artists in residence” into his field camps in southern Yukon. One of these artists, Elena Johnson, released a book of poetry, *Field Notes For the Arctic Tundra*, with Gasperau Press this spring. “As an ecologist I am trained to see mountains in terms of biophysical processes,” says Hik. “But I am not limited to that perspective. It is always enlightening to see how others see the same things and experience field research, through different lenses.”

The Canadian Mountain Studies initiative, the organization behind *Thinking Mountains*, was launched just five years ago. Slemon, Hik and mountaineering historian Zac Robinson had discovered that a surprising number of faculty members at the university were mountain specialists within their different fields. They gathered input, and eventually brought together an informal gathering of academics at the University of Alberta Faculty Club in the Fall of 2010. The meeting they organized that fall was a “casual, come-one-come-all gathering” to talk about research, says Robinson. The turnout exceeded any



expectations. “Everyone was excited to meet,” Robinson says. “Everybody was actually keen to talk to each other, and in significant sorts of ways. We all realized that afternoon that, collectively, we had something special.”

Interdisciplinary “mountain studies” programs exist at several US colleges but the Canadian Mountain Studies Initiative is the first of its kind in this country. In addition to connecting researchers, the Initiative aims to make “mountain studies” part of the University of Alberta’s

core curriculum.

A major step toward that vision was unveiled at *Thinking Mountains* this year. Mountain Studies 101 is a new Massively Open Online Course (MOOC) that provides an interdisciplinary introduction to the mountain world, drawing from environmental science, earth sciences, arts, and humanities. When finished, in 2016, the course will be available for credit at the University of Alberta. Its learning materials will also be available for free to anyone with an internet connection and

an interest in mountains. Mountain Studies 101 will be the first course of its kind anywhere in the world.

“Our vision is that students at every level can come to the University of Alberta to study mountains from across the disciplines,” says Slemon. 🐾

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## Featured Artist Philip Kanwischer



*Current*



*Taking a stand*



*Perched*



*Swoon*