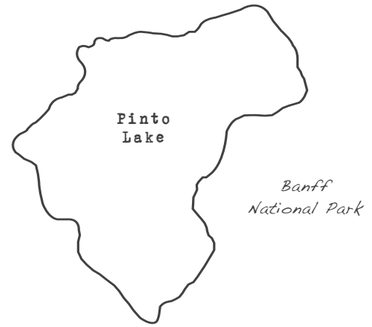
DESIGNS *of the* WILD

To the attentive observer, the landscape provides a map unto itself. Graeme Pole ventures into the Cline River wilderness, guided by contour lines, geological upthrusts and the footsteps of those who have walked before.

Calcium carbonate is both the sculptor and the sculpted here. Spend enough time wandering these valleys, drink enough from these streams that tumble from the limestone-raked heavens, and calcium gets into your bones. Dilute rock – carbonic acid – works its chemistry within you. By degrees, your skeleton transforms and merges with the landscape. Your bones and your will are strengthened, but your thirst for these mountains is never slaked.

The trail is faint, but history provides a map. In these hectic times, when we are four days from the trailhead, the mountains grant us permission to imagine. Those tree blazes – how old are they? And who swung the broad axe? Who stacked these teepee poles deep within the skirt of this Engelmann spruce? Where were those travellers going, and did they get there, and back?



Picking up the trail along the Cline River one early July, four members of our family – including myself, my wife Marnie and our two youngest daughters – began tailing Arthur P. Coleman, geologist and adventurer – a man with all things mountain in his bones. In 1892 and 1893, Coleman came this way in quest of the mythic peaks of Hooker and Brown. For intel, Coleman had merely studied an atlas. Before his second journey, Chief Jonas, a Stoney Nakoda, gave him a sketch of the north country, scribbled on paper just unwrapped from a ham. It was a fitting medium for the map. Chief Jonas knew the country as a necessity of finding meat on the hoof – bighorn sheep and mountain goats that his family would put away for the winters.

THE PAYOFF FROM ALPINE FRAUD

Two mountains held sway over the earliest exploration in the Canadian Rockies. Botanist David Douglas named Mt. Hooker and Mt. Brown in his crossing of Athabasca Pass on May 1, 1827. Douglas assigned the mountains erroneous heights of 17,000 feet and claimed to have ascended and descended Mt. Brown in the space of an afternoon from the crest of the pass. A.P. Coleman was the first in a line of illustrious explorers to venture north in search of the fabled peaks. They each came up empty of bragging rights, but their efforts filled blanks on the map at every turn, there and back.

Wisdom in Being Map-less

The atlas depiction of giant peaks would prove to be an utter fraud, and the map sketch was almost useless but for its "valuable hints" and the conviction that it lent to Coleman's enterprise. Nonetheless, the geologist and his plucky companions proved that you can travel misled and virtually map-less, yet still grasp the lay of a landscape if you study its architecture. And in most places in the front ranges of the Canadian Rockies that architecture is so consistently apparent, so limestone-clad fundamental, the required study is momentary even for a non-geologist.

Time and again on his two journeys across the angle between the North Saskatchewan River and the Athabasca River, Coleman resorted to a simple trick. With a rumoured pass close at hand, and with options to stay in this valley or to climb out to another – to carry on in a successful direction or to go off the mountain rails – he and his party would ascend a nearby peak to get the bigger picture. They did this no matter the weather, as they could ill afford to dally. The grub-pile, packed for each journey on only four troublesome ponies and much

ruined in river fords, ruled the expeditions. When the food was half-gone, it would be time either to go home or to push the outbound leg, travelling hungrier each day.

Coleman and clan topped more than twenty peaks in this fashion during those two summers. Looking from a distance of some forty kilometres, the professor reported high summits – among the real giants of the Rockies (probably Snow Dome and North Twin) – fully a decade before others claimed "discovery" of the Columbia Icefield. His account did not make print until 1911.

The Grey Blueprint

Coleman's reconnaissance climbs usually not only resolved the location of a sought-after pass, but also illuminated what lay beyond it. This result derived from the higher vantage and from the blueprint of the front ranges of the Rockies, whose upthrust grain angles southeast to northwest. The peaks stack that way in overlapping, parallel rows like grey shingles on a roof, capturing secondary valleys in the troughs at their bases – among them Cascade, Johnston, Pipestone, Siffleur, Cline and Cataract. The principal valleys into which the secondary valleys feed – Bow, Red Deer, Clearwater, North Saskatchewan, Brazeau – cut at right angles across the grain. Ascend a high front-range peak and look southeast or northwest. You will see which passes align with secondary valleys (keeping you in the front ranges) and which will deliver you to an unaligned primary valley, offering escape to the main range and, with luck (as in the case of Coleman's 1893 foray), perhaps even to your intended destination.

The land calls to us in different ways. Our purpose in trailing Coleman by 120 years was not to discern any particular mountain fact. We were looking for boot-won, calcium-rich adventure. And we found it.

We broke camp at Pinto Lake on a perfect, frosty morning. A harrowing, waist-deep, bridge-out ford of Waterfalls Creek two days earlier had us on edge. How challenging would be the upcoming crossings of Huntington Creek and Cataract Creek? They were, it transpired, trivial by comparison – a riverine hopscotch. Trivial, that is, apart from the bugs that took chunks from every surface as we hurriedly swapped boots and river shoes.

ARTHUR P. COLEMAN

Born in 1852, in Lachute, Quebec, Arthur Philemon Coleman was a geologist and mountaineer who made eight expeditions to the Canadian Rockies between 1884 and 1908. As a scientist, Coleman was in the vanguard of those who put boots on the ground to validate theory, and he did the same to resolve the mysteries of high peaks in the Rockies – Mt. Hooker, Mt. Brown and Mt. Robson. With particular interests in structural geology and glaciation, he explored mountain and Arctic environments around the world in a career that spanned more than six decades. Coleman authored numerous technical works and was highly accomplished with sketch pad and watercolours. He is best remembered for his accounts of trail life and peak roaming, published in 1911 in *The Canadian Rockies: New and Old Trails*. Banff National Park's Mount Coleman and Coleman Glacier are named in his honour.

Across Cataract Creek we milled about in the woods, having lost the trail. A century after Coleman, the map-makers, with much more at their disposal than the distant memory of a hunting trip and the wrapper from a ham, had somehow fabricated a worthless depiction of the trails on the Cline River topo sheet. But the contour lines so well-depicted on that map showed the squeeze play of cliff and forest that shouted a truth: "The trail can only be here!" We headed for that intersection of contours and found success. Although we had acquired direction, deadfalls clouded the trail, numbering about twenty per kilometre; the bugs about a hundredfold that. The sun beat down – almost too much of a good thing – and the day wore on.

From the rear of our party, I watched as our five-year-old, backpack on, hiked like a trooper. What would A.P. Coleman have made of this? I carried her across the streams and we boosted her over the more troublesome blowdowns, but she accomplished the rest. Her legs were showing muscles like cables. She climbed root plates and boulders at trailside for the utter fun of it, sponging elemental calcium from the air. The land's energy was hers. She burned it in a fire that would surely transform her little life in a manner that would endure. Hers was adventure at every turn.

An Asteroid of Limestone

In this peculiar state of awe and fatigue I almost missed the clue: a faint path – a subtle alteration of the soil – heading back downstream. It was not quite a right-angle turn, but the path had the pull of a primary valley. This would be a worthwhile side trip. I called out to the others and saw the perturbation on their faces as they turned, not wanting to backtrack even thirty metres with their monster packs.

But our reward for this extra exertion was only a few steps away. To call the trailside revelation a boulder – this chunk of mountain – would be to liken Mt. Temple to a hill. It's an asteroid of limestone. Whether it slid valley-ward from mountain high or was dropped by a retreating glacier, it is a place of power. You feel that even before you see the ochre-drawn symbols that other travellers in other times placed beneath the overhang on its southern aspect.

We ambled on. The bugs were teeming where the trail became faint, where we had to stop to pick our way. It was only mid-afternoon, yet it felt as if we had entered a timber-strewn valley without end. We declined the opportunity to use a welcoming campsite marked by weathered blazes, horse pickets and teepee poles. Finally, hunger dictated the need to camp in a place less welcoming. We cooked out on the river cobbles to allow the evening breeze to sweep away some of the bugs.

A Hidden Matterhorn

By straight line, we were only five kilometres from the Icefields Parkway. But we were locked into one of those secondary, front-range valleys, oblivious and a universe away. Hemmed for fully ten kilometres on its northeastern flank by a monolithic shingle slab of limestone that rises 1,200 metres, the Cataract Valley's southeastern flank is a contrast – a ragged, cirque-pocked cliff that gives rise to a peak that outright matterhorns the sky. Seen from the highway, this northerly neighbour of Cirrus Mountain is nondescript. Yet its appearance from the east strikes thunder. Coleman made no mention of the mountain in his account, although he passed it twice in 1893. Perhaps it was cloud-wracked, but when on his way north he had been anticipating views of truly giant peaks, on his return he was morose, bearing proof that he had been "humbugged" by a mountain myth. So much when on the trail has more to do with the mood of the observer than with what is being observed.

Almost a day later, we found our way through meadows of glacier lily, globeflower, anemone and spring beauty – the trail somewhere beneath the snowdrifts – and stream-hopped and kick-stepped our way to Cataract Pass. In the view northeast, the limestone rake of heaven had succumbed, flattened by the release of tectonic exertion where the front ranges began to splay toward the foothills. Pared away by the eons, the grey limestones yielded to underlying, rust-streaked quartzites.

Peaks and ridge systems beckoned, promising, on journeys yet to come, other rambling communions with the chemistry of rivers, rocks and sky, and with those who have walked before. ▲

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