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Who Led the First Ascent of Denali?

Hudson Stuck, archdeacon of the Yukon

Christine Woodside



FOR MANY YEARS, NO ONE KNEW WHO HE WAS BECAUSE OF THE controversies surrounding the ascent of the highest peak in North America. The missionary who organized and led the first successful climb of Mount McKinley, in June 1913, stands against typical climbing literature that bursts with bold narratives of danger. Pushing against bitter conditions toward the goal of reaching the summit, all climbers risk illness and death. If they triumph by climbing the mountain, they later retell these horrible quests to admiring audiences. The typical climbing narrative revolves around the ego of the climber. That wasn't true with the Rev. Hudson Stuck, a humble Episcopal priest who cared almost nothing for his reputation.

Stuck's official title was archdeacon of the Yukon. His territory of outpost churches and meetings spanned such a huge area that he spent most of his time on dogsleds or riverboats trying to reach them. He climbed mountains as a sideline. The understated way he approached the Denali expedition was the opposite of the hoopla around Dr. Frederick Cook, the celebrity who claimed to have reached the top in 1906, and who persisted in that claim for many decades. Cook's summit claim had fallen under a cloud of doubt by 1913, and many climbers scrutinized his photos and the story he told in a public battle that slogged on for years. The Stuck expedition remained a quiet footnote in climbing history until decades afterward. This journal, and other magazines including *Harper's*, had devoted many pages to the Cook trip, and to the subsequent discrediting of it. After the Stuck achievement, *Appalachia* only noted in a few lines his election to the American Alpine Club, more than a year later, in 1914.

It's odd that such an achievement, climbing the highest mountain in North America, would go unnoticed in *Appalachia*, which then was the official publication of the American Alpine Club. This comes from no lack of interest by the journal. It comes from Stuck's lack of interest in trumpeting the story. Stuck did not think of himself first as a climber. He went to Alaska to work as an Episcopal priest in an environment that would drag him into a harsh climate and situation, traveling thousands of miles by dogsled or canoe (depending on the weather) to preach the Christian gospel. He wanted to go to Alaska because he believed the wilderness conditions would test him in his work. For the sixteen years he worked and lived in Alaska, before his death in

The Rev. Hudson Stuck leads an Episcopal service in a remote Alaskan village, circa 1914. This photo appeared in Stuck's book, 10,000 Miles with a Dog Sled.

1920 at age 55, he remained an advocate of Alaska Natives and committed to his work.

Stuck's life before the Alaskan period lay outside ordinary bounds of conventionality, too. He was born in England, arrived in America at 17 after tossing a coin—heads, he'd go to Australia, tails, he'd go to Texas—and worked as a cowboy before attending the seminary at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee. He was ordained in 1892 and served at churches in Cuero, Texas, and Dallas, where he was a popular dean of the St. Matthew's Cathedral from 1896 until he left for Alaska. He could have stayed in Dallas for the rest of his life, probably. But he began to feel restless and too comfortable. Stuck followed a popular line of thinking in the early 1900s known as "muscular Christianity." He believed that Christian faith ought to spread beyond the organized churches, which he and others thought attracted more women than men. The muscular Christianity movement stressed physical challenges and toughness of spirit. (It was responsible for the founding of the YMCA.)

STUCK WANTED A NEW CHALLENGE, AND HE'D READ ABOUT THE Rev. Peter Trimble Rowe, the first bishop of the territory of Alaska.

"I design, quite frankly and honestly, to give some years of my life to the work of the missionary field, and I want it to be hard and remote work," he typed on letterhead of St. Matthew's Cathedral in a note to the Rev. Arthur S. Lloyd, the domestic secretary of the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society, in 1903. Stuck wrote he was worried that the church appeared to want a medical doctor rather than a priest that year at Point Hope, Alaska. His brief letter showed his urgent desire to go far north.

"I have a feeling that some years of every clergyman's life are rightly due to this work," he wrote, "and having no family ties or other hindrances, I propose to give up parish work in the near future and satisfy my feeling in this matter. Alaska attracts me because I have conceived a great respect and affection for Bishop Rowe, and have been touched by the hardships he has endured, and his perfect readiness to endure them. I think he realizes one's idea of the missionary bishop."

In his applications, Stuck did not mention climbing, although it had to be on his mind. He already had climbed Mount Rainier and in the Canadian Rockies. He was headed to a life not unlike climbing, though. He wanted a challenge, and comfort and money didn't motivate him. "The salary mentioned by the bishop is fifteen hundred dollars a year, plus traveling expenses. The bishop said that on this salary it was just possible to live on the

Yukon,” Stuck wrote to a superior in 1904, when he hoped to leave his post at St. Matthew’s and head to the far north. “I want enough to live on, but I do not want any more.” His salary would equal about \$36,000 now.

TO UNDERSTAND HOW MISSIONARIES IN THE EARLY 1900S THOUGHT requires a wheeling back into the mores of the time, and this demands some patience. Although I find some of Stuck’s descriptions of Alaska Natives’ life a bit patronizing, it’s very clear that his aim in going to Alaska was not to “civilize” miners and Alaska Natives (a common line of thought in some missionary groups at that time) but to spread the message of love and hope in remote places.

Stuck wrote derisively about what he called “sanctimonious terminology” of missionaries who would tame the heathen out of their ways of life. He found the Alaska Natives to be gentle, kind people with few advocates outside of Alaska.



To reach his outpost churches in mining towns and Alaska Native villages, Stuck traveled by dogsled over iced-in waterways. “No amount of clothing that it is possible to wear on the trail will keep one warm while standing still,” he wrote. This photo appeared in Stuck’s book 10,000 Miles with a Dog Sled.

In his book *The Alaskan Missions of the Episcopal Church* (Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society, 1920), Stuck criticized anyone who thought Alaska Natives practiced animism. “The ‘animism’ of the Yukon Indians was a gloomy and degrading superstition,” Stuck wrote. He was firm that he found no evidence of Alaskan tribes attaching a soul to inanimate objects. Stuck *did* believe that Native peoples in the Yukon River area lived in fear of the unknown. He wrote that they “lived in a constant dread of the baleful activities of disembodied spirits,” and that villages he saw were equipped with underground chambers where rites and ceremonies involving departed souls took place. “Yet the people were not idolaters,” Stuck went on. “I have never heard of images being worshipped; I do not think they had any notions of worship, as other races entertain it, at all.”

Stuck’s goal was to teach “that there is one God whose name is Love,” but he did not want to strip away the particularities of the tribal ways of life. In *The Alaskan Missions of the Episcopal Church*, he wrote that he was horrified at “the havoc wrought by white men,” such as early bandits exploring the coast of whom John Muir saw evidence in 1881: they had “died of starvation caused by abundance of rum,” Stuck wrote, “which rendered them careless about the laying up of ordinary supplies of food for the winter.” He railed against the U.S. plans to start commercial salmon canning operations at the mouth of the Yukon, because the Natives depended on salmon to feed themselves and their indispensable dogsled dogs, without which they could not travel in winter.

“The contemptuous dismissal of all the little peoples of the world as beneath the regard of the great races, or even a supercilious rating of them by the white man’s own standards, does not seem to reflect the feeling of thoughtful men today as much, perhaps, as it did some decades ago,” Stuck wrote.

Stuck criticized the attitude he perceived from federal officials in Washington, D.C., about the Alaskan Indian tribes. In the missions book, he quoted, with outrage, a U.S. senator he said had asked him once, “What do your Yukon Indians contribute to the welfare of the world?”

He also railed against the government’s renaming of Denali—the most common of the Alaskan Indian names for the mountain—after William McKinley when he was still just a candidate for president. *Denali* is an Athabascan Indian word meaning “the great one” or “the high one.” Renaming it *McKinley* followed the advice of a gold prospector. “No voice was raised in protest,” Stuck wrote in his book, *The Ascent of Denali* (Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1914), “for the Alaskan Indian is inarticulate and such white

men as knew the old name were absorbed in the search for gold.” Stuck also criticized the naming of the adjacent peak, called Denali’s Wife, after U.S. Senator Joseph B. Foraker of Ohio. Such names meant little in the shadow of these grand peaks, he believed. Stuck said, “Simplicity is always a quality of true majesty.”

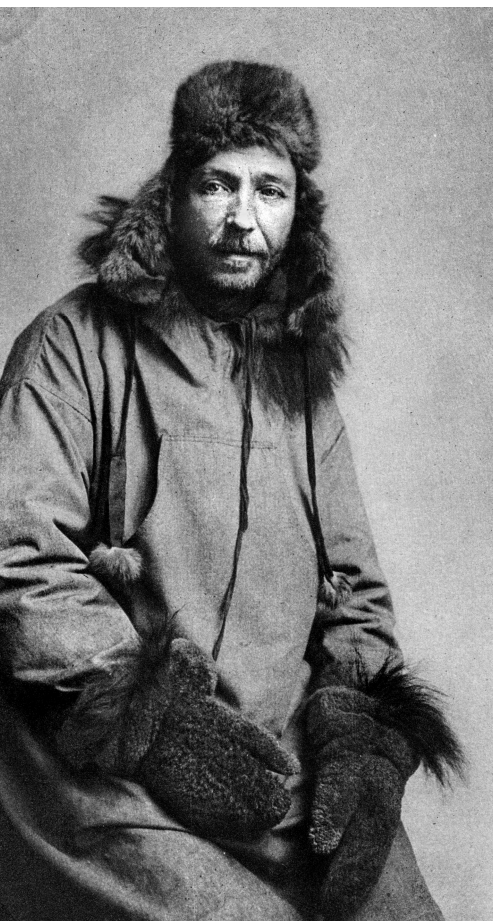
The Climb

Just as he understood the Natives’ awe of “the great one,” Stuck harbored a desire to climb it. When he finally asked Rowe for a leave of absence to attempt Denali, Stuck was 49 and had worked in the missionary field for eight years. He likely had read of the two earlier failed expeditions with great interest, and wondered if he could do it. The year of the Stuck expedition, 1913, came before the public had resolved the legitimacy of the two summit claims: Cook’s 1906 claim and that of the 1910 “Sourdough expedition,” a group of miners from Fairbanks who had planted a spruce pole on what turned out later to be the lower north summit.

Many later concluded that Cook had deluded himself into believing his own fabrications. Belmore Browne, a climber who’d been with Cook before his last attempt, published a book discrediting Cook. Cook never changed his claim.

STUCK SET OUT IN SPRING 1913 WITH A SMALL GROUP OF FRIENDS and associates. He took his friend Harry Karstens, a postulant to the Episcopal priesthood named Robert G. Tatum, and three young Alaska Natives. Of the Natives, two of them were only 14 and 15 years old; the third was a 20-year-old named Walter Harper who had helped Stuck in his missionary travels. Stuck was eager for Harper to reach the top.

“He hoped his ascent would bolster respect for native Alaskans,” writes Art Davidson in a preface to the reprinting of Stuck’s book *The Ascent of Denali*. (Stuck’s book joins with two others in *Denali: Deception, Defeat & Triumph*, The Mountaineers Books, 2001.) He also hoped that the federal government would change the mountain name back to Denali. Stuck wrote (in *The Ascent of Denali*), “There is, to the author’s mind, a certain ruthless arrogance that grows more offensive to him as the years pass by, in the temper that comes to a ‘new’ land and contemptuously ignores the native names of conspicuous natural objects, almost always appropriate and significant, and overlays them with names that are, commonly, neither the one nor the other.”



This portrait of Stuck appeared at the beginning of his book 10,000 Miles with a Dog Sled.

To reach the mountain, Karstens navigated their boat on the Kantishna and Bearpaw rivers. The group then moved a huge amount of supplies, using dogs and sleds, to the beginning of the Muldrow Glacier. The glacier runs between the south and north peaks. The group found that an earthquake had damaged the northeast ridge. The team, especially Karstens, spent dangerous traverses chopping out ice steps on the way up. The rest of the mountain wasn't technically difficult, as Stuck put it, but rather remote, large, and cold.

On the morning of June 6, the four who would go for the top—Stuck, Karstens, Tatum, and Harper—awoke at 3 A.M. Everyone except Harper suffered digestive uproars after eating Harper's attempt at homemade noodles the night before. It was -21 degrees when they arose, but by the time they set out at 5 A.M. carrying only altitude-measuring instruments and lunch, it had warmed to -4 in the sun. "We were rather a sorry company," Stuck wrote. "Karstens still had internal pains; Tatum and I had severe headaches. Walter was the only one feeling entirely himself, so Walter was put in the lead and in the lead he remained all day." They climbed up to a horseshoe-

shaped ridge that would lead to the top. "Soon after we started, the grade got so steep that we were compelled to zigzag," wrote Harper in his diary. They battled numb feet and shortness of breath as they climbed above the north peak and set out to the last small ridge. "Walter, who had been in the lead all day, was the first to scramble up," Stuck wrote. "A native Alaskan, he is the first human being to set foot upon the top of Alaska's great mountain, and he had well earned the lifelong distinction." Karstens and Tatum were next, and those three hauled Stuck, who said he was unconscious for a moment on the "little crater-like snow basin" that makes up the summit.

Somehow they managed to shake hands and say a prayer of thanksgiving. They then set up the mercurial barometer and its boiling-point apparatus lit by a candle beneath. They established the elevation at 23,300 feet. Then they ventured to look at the view. They were high enough to see Mount Foraker (which is hidden by Denali's south peak most of the way up). "Beyond stretched, blue and vague to the southwest, the wide valley of the Kuskokwim, with an end of all mountains." The skies were clear where they stood, but a distant haze blocked a view they'd hoped to see of the junction of the Yukon and Tanana rivers. From that spot, 150 miles away, Stuck had often looked up at Denali while on missionary trips. To the south and east, a "tangle of mountain ranges" fell away and merged with the distant sea.

"Yet the chief impression was not of our connection with the earth so far below, its rivers and its seas, but rather a detachment from it," Stuck wrote. "We seemed alone upon a dead world, as dead as the mountains on the moon." He knew the scene was a rare one for any lifetime. And the group knew they had to get down before they froze.

After the Stuck group had stood on the summit, they were convinced that Cook's story of reaching the top was a lie. Stuck wrote in *The Ascent of Denali* that Cook's narrative of the higher reaches "grows grandiloquent and vague. . . . It is quite impossible to follow his course from the description given in his book *To the Top of the Continent*. This much may be said: from the summit of the mountain, on a clear day, it seemed evident that no ascent was possible from the south side of the range at all. That was the judgment of all four members of our party. Doctor Cook talks about 'the heaven-scraped granite of the top' and 'the dazzling whiteness of the frosted granite blocks,' and prints a photograph of the top showing granite slabs. There is no rock of any kind on the South (the higher) Peak above nineteen thousand feet."

More than a year after Stuck's party climbed Denali, a small notice appeared in *Appalachia* (October 1914, XIII no. 2). It was a notice that he'd been elected to membership in the American Alpine Club. "Hudson Stuck, D.D., Fort Yukon, AK. Proposed by Harrington Putnam, seconded by Henry G. Bryant, dated June 2, 1914. Denali (Mt. McKinley), June 1913. Victoria, Lefroy (Canadian Rockies), 1904. Rainier, 1907. Colorado Rockies, Sierra Blanca, Huerfano, etc., 1903. Sierra Nevada, 1901, etc., etc."

The "etc." should include the thousands of miles by dogsled Stuck traveled in his life's work. After the Denali trip, Stuck continued as a traveling missionary throughout Alaska for eight more years. Stuck encouraged Harper, whom he treated like a son, to attend college in Massachusetts. The two made a six-month dogsled trip of 2,200 miles together in 1917, the same year Harper

married a nurse and intended to move to Philadelphia for medical studies, but the couple died on a ship that struck a reef. Stuck, devastated by Harper's death, continued to lead services around the vast territory of the Yukon. In 1920, after conducting a service inside a chilly church, as a doctor recalled, he caught a cold he couldn't shake. It developed into pneumonia, and Stuck died in 1920 in Fort Yukon. "If it is God's will that I go, then I am ready to go; I think my usefulness is served—my work is done," he told his doctor, Grafton Burke. Dr. Burke wrote in a letter to John Wilson Wood, executive secretary of the Episcopal Church's missions department, that the Native Council in Fort Yukon had carried Stuck's body to the grave he had chosen, in the Native graveyard. Wood announced that the Episcopal Church established a fund of \$25,000 to support St. Stephen's Hospital in Fort Yukon. "Every friend of the Archdeacon knows that no other work in Alaska was quite so near his heart," Wood wrote. Although Stuck's place in history was atop Denali, his life's work lay in the lowlands.

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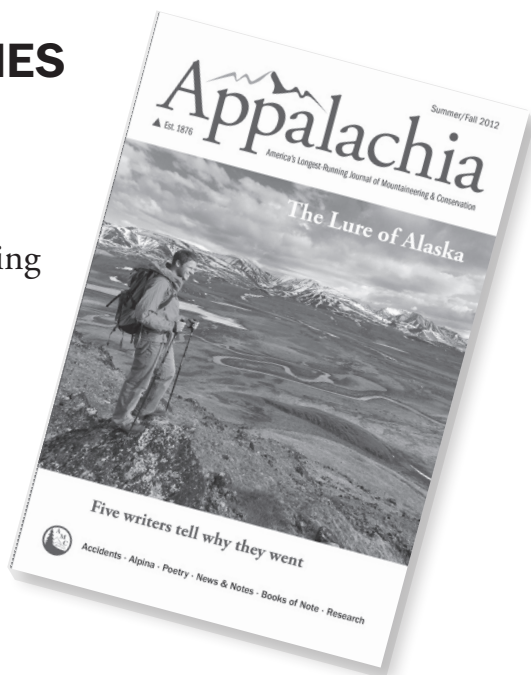
CHRISTINE WOODSIDE of Deep River, Connecticut, is the editor-in-chief of *Appalachia*.

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