



*Enjoying the summit of Crystal Peak NZ*



# Marie Byles: Mountain Conqueror

WORDS: Anne McLeod

**Born more than one hundred years ago, mountaineer, lawyer, conservationist, Buddhist, feminist and author Marie Byles was more than an extraordinary woman, she was one of the founders of the Australian outdoor community.**

## PIONEERING IN LAW

In every sphere of her life, Marie Byles demonstrated the qualities of independence and self-belief that allowed her to climb the world's highest mountains. As the first woman to qualify to practise law in New South Wales in 1924, she triumphed over the entrenched chauvinism of the legal profession. In establishing her own successful, ethical legal practice Marie became a powerful role-model to other women in law.

Acting as Honorary Solicitor for feminist organisations, she worked to change laws that discriminated against women's rights in marriage and divorce, and most cruelly, in the guardianship of their own children. But instead of the fame and fortune she could have earned in law, Marie devoted her spare energies to the conservation of the Australian environment.

## CRUSADING FOR CONSERVATION

When her family arrived from England in 1911 they were enraptured by the strange and to them, exotic Australian landscape. Her parents chose to live on the outskirts of Sydney amongst the native bush, and they donated a large tract of land to the Wildflower Protection Society. Weekends were spent in the Blue Mountains close to Sydney, and longer holidays exploring the Kosciuszko region, then at Palm Beach on Pittwater, where the family built a beach house.

From this verandah Marie gazed through a telescope to the rugged stretch of untouched coastline beyond the Hawkesbury River renowned for its shipwrecks. Vowing to visit her "faery lands forlorn" she eventually led a group of university

girlfriends overland through dense scrub to the beach where they danced on the sand and swam in the bay. Ten years later Marie spearheaded a campaign that ensured this superbly wild area was reserved as Bouddi Natural Park (now National Park).

An early member of the Sydney Bushwalkers Club, Marie and her friends, including Paddy Pallin who made all their equipment, would board a train on Friday nights, to spend weekends exploring as far as they could. As they grew to know and respect the landscape, the walkers felt a commitment to protecting the beautiful and ecologically sensitive areas which brought them so much pleasure.

An early and zealous advocate for wilderness, Marie worked determinedly as Honorary Solicitor of the Federation of Bushwalking Clubs to petition the government to reserve and protect vast areas of land. Before the National Parks and Wildlife Service was constituted in 1967, the bushwalkers took on the responsibility of managing the reserved areas by serving on Trusts and attending regular working bees.

To educate the public about their natural heritage, Marie wrote full-page stories for the Sydney Morning Herald and other newspapers from as early as 1927, tantalising the readers with descriptions of their exhilarating expeditions and photographs of the impressive scenery.

## MEASURING UP TO MOUNT COOK

As soon as she had saved enough money, Marie left Australia and travelled the world by cargo boat, in an effort to gain experience in alpine

climbing. She climbed in Scotland, Norway and Canada, and by the time she had graduated from the Canadian Alpine Club's elite training camp in the Rocky Mountains, she felt ready to tackle the New Zealand Alps.

Staying at the South Island's renowned Hermitage Hotel in 1928, Marie ignored the more experienced climbers who told her that New Zealand's mountains were climbs for men. She hired guides and met a woman named Marjorie Jones, who also expressed an interest in joining an expedition. Dwarfed by not only the mountains, but by their stature as mountaineers, Marjorie stood at 152cm and weighed only 39.5kg. With Marie beside her at 157cm in knickerbockers, jacket and bonnet, they were quite a sight.

Marie's objective was Malte Brun (3199m), but after a four-hour hike up the massive Tasman Glacier, the party were marooned by a blizzard for three days in a freezing alpine hut. When the snowstorm subsided, the guides deemed the summit too dangerous, as the fresh snow would make the route too treacherous.

Malte Brun commanded a spectacular view of the whole of the Upper Tasman Glacier and when Aorangi (Mount Cook – 3763m), at last emerged from the mist, the setting sun made a halo behind its snowy crest. The mountain seemed remote and inaccessible, and Marie did not dare hope that she should ever reach the top of those jagged and forbidding rocks. When Alf, one of her guides, suggested they climb up to Haast Hut, 2134m up on Mt Cook, Marie eagerly took up his offer, leaving the others at the Hermitage.

Upon reaching Haast Hut, the pair met two





*Marie and Marjorie Jones with Norwegian guides Alf Brustad and Arne Larsen on their expedition to Mt Cook | Marie sailing the world on a cargo ship in search of mountaineering training | the first complete swim and walk of the Kowmung River NSW | Marie in southern China on her expedition to The White Dragon*

men who had been waiting for the weather to clear, and were preparing to leave the next morning for the summit. Marie and Alf decided to join them. So it was that shortly after 1am, they left the hut, silver moonlight bathing the landscape with an ethereal mystic splendour.

For several hours the group plodded through the soft snow as the sun rose above the ranges, "like a great ball of fire, touching first one peak, then another, with the deepest crimson glow." Soon the blaze had faded away into the light of a bright and clear, cold day. Eating a hasty breakfast, they prepared for a quick ascent of the dangerous Linda Glacier that was periodically swept by avalanches from the icecap of Cook. With the prospect of death before them, they hurried up the Linda as quickly as possible. Above the glacier

were some steep ice-slopes where steps had to be cut. Marie wrote, "it was heart-breaking work, and it seemed as if we could not possibly reach the summit, for already it was noon and we had been on the climb for eleven hours."

At last they reached the summit rocks and with relief took off their heavy steel crampons. It was painful work crawling up the final icecap, and as they looked over the 1200m precipice, a piercing, raging wind threatened to push Marie over. Unafraid, she had the joyful feeling that the "monarch of the mountains" was theirs at last. It was 3.30pm and with a hurried shaking of hands, two photographs, and a "hasty glance at the most superb panorama imaginable," they commenced their descent, the worst Marie had ever experienced.

The wind increased in ferocity with each step. It was so fierce that Marie needed to lie on her side, feeling her way down the interminable slope. Her side became black and blue and her left arm ached until it hurt to touch, but it had to be done. Unable to provide Marie with physical support, Alf gave her the moral support she needed to continue on their perilous descent.

The sun set below a whirlwind of clouds as they reached the Linda Glacier with only half their journey home accomplished. With the aid of only a dim lantern they reached an open crevasse, only to find that a snow bridge they had used in the morning had collapsed. Fortunately it was a small gap, so they took a risk and jumped, while anchored to each other.

At 2.45am, just twenty-five hours and forty





*Camping by the Shoalhaven River | Marie amongst fellow bushwalkers take a break | taking the weight off of her hobnail boots | a forest camp in Blue Gum Forest | Thanks to the Sydney Bushwalkers Club National Trust of Australia NSW and The Mitchell Library for photographs*

minutes after they had set out, the team made it through the hut door having set a record for a party. After a ten hour sleep, Marie declared she was ready to do it all again. Instead, while Marjorie and Arne headed for the summit, she laid basking in the sunshine, at one with the spirit of the Universe as the "serenity of Nature brooded over all."

Telegrams of congratulation flowed in while they were still on the mountain. The climb made Marie's reputation in the mountaineering community and was the culmination of a year of "unalloyed delight." She was 28 years old and felt that life had just begun.

### FOLLOWING FOOTPRINTS

Marie Byles twice returned to New Zealand to climb virgin peaks and continued to climb with

her newfound friend, Marjorie Jones. In 1938 Marie led an international expedition to the south of China, to a jagged unclimbed peak known locally as the "White Dragon." Within reach of the summit, the monsoon rains destroyed her dream and two years of planning. She returned home shattered, but the heartbreak turned her towards Eastern philosophy in a quest to find meaning in life beyond success and failure.

Travelling through India and Burma in the 1950s and 60s Marie discovered Buddha Dhamma, and experienced the benefits of the ancient technique of meditation that the Buddha taught. She gained an international reputation through her books on Buddhism and Eastern philosophy and influenced a new generation. Back home in Australia, Marie continued to be environmentally

aware, practising a lifestyle of voluntary simplicity in a cottage next to a natural reserve, which before her death in 1979 she donated to the National Trust.

Always many years ahead of her time, Marie Byles' achievements and service to the community in her three fields of endeavour – feminism/law, bushwalking/conservation and Buddhism/spirituality mark her as an Australian whose contribution lives on through her vision, bravery and generosity. ☐

**Outdoor biographer, Anne McLeod first encountered Marie Byles through Marie's book *Footprints of Gautama The Buddha* while travelling in India. Each new discovery about this courageous adventurer and progressive social activist deepened Anne's appreciation of her exceptional life, inspiring her to research and write a biography, which is still in progress.**