



Fantastic Female Adventurers

Truly amazing tales of
women exploring the world

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GWEN MOFFAT

Living the High Life

Climbing with Britain's first female mountain guide

From hundreds of metres below Gwen came the sound of cowbells. Somewhere down there among the high pastures and forests was the cabin where she was staying – but she didn't look down. Instead, clinging to the rock face, she studied the cliff above her head, searching for handholds, trying to work out the best route. The rock was pale grey limestone with yellow streaks. Tiny purple flowers bloomed in the cracks. She could feel the midday sun beating down on her back.

It was 1952 – the year that Queen Elizabeth II came to the throne in Great Britain. Gwen Moffat, who would become Britain's first female mountain guide, was climbing in the Dolomites. As a girl, Gwen had always had a thirst for adventure, but never imagined that she would find those adventures in the mountains. Growing up, she had wanted to become a journalist, to travel and to see the world.

Gwen's dreams about exploring came mostly from books and films. As a child, she loved reading. 'On my first day at primary school I grazed my knee in the playground and it turned septic,' she says. 'I was sick at home for months and my sister taught me to read. By the time I returned to school I was reading voraciously. In secondary school my favourite subjects were art, geography and English – except for grammar, when I usually read a book at the back of the class. And I always took a sketchbook with me on bike rides through the countryside around our home.'

Gwen was inspired by stories of her aunt Elizabeth, who had been a teacher in India and who had climbed in the Himalaya. This was very unusual for a woman at that time. Gwen watched films and read everything she could about India, hoping to travel there herself one day. By her mid-teens, she was reading books about great women explorers: Ella Maillart, Freya Stark and Gertrude Bell.

When Gwen grew up in the 1930s, things were very different to how they are today. 'For grammar school girls with good exam results it was a dull outlook,' Gwen explains. 'Women were not encouraged to go for higher

education. Teaching, nursing or secretarial work were the norm, but I always wondered why a woman couldn't be a scientist or a surgeon, or run her own company.'

When Gwen was fifteen, the Second World War began. After she left school, she spent some time working in a newspaper office before deciding to join the Women's Land Army and later the Auxiliary Territorial Service. She was not allowed to fight, but had a job as a driver – she drove anything from cars and motorbikes to ambulances and three-tonne lorries. She also worked as an army PE instructor, which she loved.

Six months after the war ended, Gwen's life changed forever when she discovered mountains. She was twenty-one. A friend had taken her climbing in North Wales.

'Our first climb was covered with ice and it was bland, like climbing slippery stairs,' remembers Gwen. 'But on the second day the ice on the rocks was thawing and my next climb was like going up a series of walls, with cracks and chimneys – which are deep, wide gaps in the rock that you can fit your body into – and with steep slabs of smooth grey rock ... yet there were holds for your feet and hands. Icy cold water was streaming down all of it, but I loved every minute. I was tested. My body had to work: inching up cracks, hauling itself up chimneys. And my brain was also needed: concentration, balance, and judgement. But really, all I felt at the time was fulfilment: I had found *adventure*. It was only coming down, when it was over, that I also knew I'd fallen in love. That mountain, Tryfan, is still my favourite.'

That day, Gwen decided to leave the army and join her friends, a group of artists and climbers who lived in Cornwall at the time, doing forestry work. All Gwen had when she left the army was her sleeping bag and tent. She had to earn money to support herself and so over the next few months she travelled around the country to find work. During this time she often stayed with her friends in their rented cottages, but occasionally she slept in barns or beneath hedgerows, or camped wild. She didn't have a car or a bike, so she hitch-hiked and walked everywhere. An animal lover, she also adopted a stray dog, Thomas, who accompanied her on many of her journeys.



During the first two years after she left the army, Gwen had many different jobs: artist's model, farm worker, looking after props for a theatre, forester, secretary, gardener, hotel maid, steering a schooner (a type of sailing ship) and driving a grocery delivery van in the Scottish Highlands. But whenever she had any free time, she went climbing in the mountains, getting stronger, fitter and improving her technique.

To save money, she often wore old clothes that her sister had sent her. For a long time, she only had one dress, which was made from old blackout curtains. She climbed wearing old shirts, jumpers, rolled-up trousers or perhaps a bikini in the summer. She loved to climb barefoot when possible, so she could feel the rock under her feet. This also helped to make her climbing boots last longer, as they were expensive to replace. In those days, climbing boots had nails in their soles to give more grip. Today, climbing boots are much more advanced and have special rubber on their soles to help grip the rock.

Gwen and her friends swam in lakes and rivers to get clean. 'We always warmed up afterwards by running up and down, slapping ourselves to get dry. We never used towels.' She loved to go wild swimming whenever she could and at all times of year. Once, after a winter dip in Loch Ness when snow lay all around, Gwen was trotting naked along a quiet road to dry off when she met a family in a car driving to church, and she had to dive quickly behind a tree to hide, but the bare branches hid very little!

One of Gwen's happiest times was when she lived in a cottage on the Isle of Skye, where she loved scrambling along the high ridges and climbing the jagged mountains. It was on Skye that she also discovered the excitement of 'scree running' – bounding down a steep mountainside covered in loose, moving stones called scree. It was like running down a fast-moving conveyor belt. She earned money by picking winkles on the shore and she also fished, baked bread, picked wild garlic and berries, and cut peat for the fire. Gwen also started to write about her adventures and had her articles published in magazines.

Sometimes, when money was short, Gwen went hungry. She often survived on one meal a day: cheese, nettles and homemade bread. 'Nettles are full of iron. They're best as soup or they can be cooked like spinach.' Gwen laughs as she remembers a time a cow approached her in a field. 'I could milk a cow and I could do with the milk. So I just milked her into a mug.'

This tough lifestyle might not suit everyone, but it gave Gwen the freedom and adventure she craved. She climbed in the Alps and the Dolomites in Europe and was the first woman to complete difficult routes there. As well as climbing, she grew to love walking in the mountains, and explored them in all seasons and

weathers, both day and night. This taught her how to stay safe in the outdoors and when to turn around and head for home.