



4 The Backdrop to the Lake

As one drives up the valley of the Maligne River, the view of the mountains is limited. Upon reaching the lake, however, the panorama of the peaks beside and beyond the longest lake in the Canadian Rockies is outstanding and well worth the drive. L. S. Amery, a British statesman, climber and author who visited the area, was so impressed that he wrote, "Lake Maligne is the most fantastically varied and beautiful thing the whole range of the Rockies has to show."¹⁶

Henry MacLeod, a surveyor under the direction of Sandford Fleming of the CPR, was the first non-native to travel up the Maligne River from the Athabasca River valley. After struggling up the long, narrow valley in 1875, he named the lake at its source Sorefoot Lake. The river's name was based on the French word for wicked, which is how the early fur traders felt about the valley and the stream. The lake subsequently took its name from the river.

In 1908 Mary Schaffer, together with her companion Mollie Adams, a botanist friend, a cook and two guides reached the shores of Maligne Lake after a long pack trip from Lake Louise. Her party was following a map drawn for them the previous year by a Stoney Indian, which guided them to the lake from the southwest over what is now known as Maligne Pass. Upon reaching the lake, it became obvious to the group that the best way to continue their exploration was on the lake itself. A raft, which they christened *HMS Chaba* after the Indian name for the lake, Chaba Imne, was assembled. The guides determined that, "we were to go in style regardless of our plea that we were willing to

rough it for a few days; air-beds, tents, and food for three days were to be taken on that raft."¹⁷ The group spent three idyllic days sailing their craft to the end of the lake and back. During the almost two weeks the group spent on and near the lake, they found no sign of man, "just masses of flowers, the lap-lap of the waters on the shore, the occasional reverberating roar of an avalanche and our own voices stilled by a nameless Presence."¹⁸

From Maligne Lake
The south end of the Maligne Lake road, 43.1 km from Highway 16.

Evening light at Maligne Lake (l-r: Mount Paul, Monkhead Mountain, Mount Warren, Valad Peak, Mount Henry MacLeod, Mount Charlton, Mount Unwin). Photo Don Beers.





Spirit Island with Mount Paul, Monkhead Mountain and Mount Warren looming in the background. Photo by Don Beers.



Oliver Wheeler with Paul Sharples on Maligne Lake, 1911. Courtesy Whyte Museum, V139 PS70.

The boat house in the foreground was built by Curly Phillips, a well-known guide in the Jasper area during the early 1900s. It is recognized as a Registered Historic Resource.

The upper slopes of two peaks, **Leah Peak** (2801 m) and **Samson Peak** (3081 m), form the left side of the panorama and are similar in profile. They were named by Mary Schaffer for a married couple: Samson and Leah Beaver. Samson was the Stoney Indian who provided Mrs. Schaffer with the map she used to find the lake. He had visited the lake with his father when he was 14 years of age, and 16 years later was able to draw the map from memory when he met Mrs. Schaffer at Elliott Barnes' cabin on the Kootenay Plains.

Mount Paul (2805 m) is most impressive from Samson Narrows, probably one of the most recognized viewpoints in Jasper National Park. It lies eight km from the north end of the lake, just over half way to the end. When Mary Schaffer's party reached this point they thought that they had reached the end of the lake until, after navigating the narrows, "There burst upon us that which, all in our little company agreed, was the finest view any of us had ever beheld in the Rockies."¹⁹ It is from here, with the small, treed Spirit Island in the foreground, that Mount Paul rises, towerlike, 1134 m above the lake. The group originally referred to this mountain as The Thumb.

In 1911, during her second visit to the lake, Mary Schaffer was accompanied by her nine year-old nephew, Paul Sharples. The previous winter Paul had suffered from whooping cough and was taken along because Mary felt he needed a summer of fresh air and sunshine. As they passed below the narrows they "looked up to the great buttresses of The Thumb, and sighed a long sigh at the wonderfulness of it all. Even the small boy was silenced by the splendour of the scene for the time being, and then the little voice uttered... 'I suppose I am too little a boy to have a mountain named for me.'²⁰ Mary responded, "No, I think if you stayed a very good boy for the rest of the trip and not..." (mentioning a few lapses of good behaviour chronic to small boys), "we might call that mountain Mount Paul.... But remember this, that if you fail to keep your part of the bargain, off comes the name.... He promised, but the name had to be removed twice; however, it was on there when we left. So I hope it may remain for years to come, to mark the visit of the first white child who navigated those waters."²¹

To the right of Mount Paul rises the two heads of **Mount Warren** (3140 m). Schaffer describes how after passing The Thumb, "next rose a magnificent double-headed pile of rock, whose perpendicular cliffs reached almost to the shore.... It was its massiveness, its simple dignity which appealed to us so

strongly, and we named it Mount Warren, in honour of 'Chief,' through whose grit and determination we were able to behold this splendour."²² Billy Warren was Mary Schaffer's packer and chief guide and later became her second husband. Regarding his skills as a guide she wrote, "There are older ones (guides), there are better hunters, perhaps, with wider experience in forest lore, more knowledge of the country, but for kindness, good nature (such a necessary adjunct), good judgment under unexpected stress, he had no superior."²³

In 1950 the lower, easterly peak of Mount Warren was assigned the name **Monkhead** (3211 m) because of the resemblance to a monk's cloak with a hood.

Glacier-clad **Mount Henry MacLeod** (3288 m), the highest peak in this panorama, was named after the CPR surveyor who first saw Maligne Lake in 1875. Although Arthur Coleman named the mountain in 1902, 44 years passed before the lower rock-covered mountain just to its left was named **Valad Peak** (3250 m) after MacLeod's Metis guide, Valad. Valad made some efforts to retain the original names given to features by the natives and the Metis in the Athabasca River valley area. While guiding Sir Sandford Fleming, the great Canadian scientist and railway executive, he had discussions with Sir Sandford regarding, "the old local titles of the mountains...., but every passer-by thinks that he has a right to give his own and his friends' names to them over again."²⁴

The beautiful twin peaks of **Mount Charlton** (3217 m) and **Mount Unwin** (3268 m) lie to the right of Samson Narrows and to the left of the valley from which the Maligne River flows into the lake from its headwaters 14 km to the southeast. Mount Charlton may be the only mountain ever named after an advertising agent. Henry Ready Charlton held this position with the Grand Trunk Railway. He realized that Maligne Lake could become one of the park's major attractions and assisted in arranging for Mary Schaffer to return in 1911 to do a more detailed topographic survey of the area.

Sidney Unwin was Mary Schaffer's second guide during her 1908 visit. She wrote, "Opposite our camp rose a fine snow-capped mountain down whose sides swept a splendid glacier. As we paddled slowly in sight of it, (Unwin) suddenly looked up and said, 'That is the mountain from which I first saw the lake.' So we promptly named it Mount Unwin."²⁵

When surveyor Arthur Wheeler visited the area he felt somewhat slighted that a mere amateur had already named all the mountains and suggested alternatives. But Mary Schaffer's choices prevailed and all but three of the peaks in the view from the north end of Maligne Lake were named by her.

Mary Schaffer

Jasper National Park was created in 1907 and it has been suggested that Mary Schaffer was the park's first tourist. But Mary Schaffer was no ordinary tourist; she was the first non-native woman to travel through much of Banff and Jasper national parks.

A native of Pennsylvania, Mary Schaffer's first trip to the Canadian Rockies was in 1889 when she accompanied a group of members of the Philadelphia Academy of Natural Sciences. She was joined by a fellow art student, Mary Vaux, who was visiting Glacier House, the Canadian Pacific Railway's hotel in the Selkirks. Obviously an adventurous pair, they travelled part of the way on top of a boxcar. The following year she returned to the Selkirks, now as the wife of Dr. Charles Schaffer, a physician with a driving interest in botany whom she had met at Glacier House the previous year. Dr. Schaffer had a particular interest in the wildflowers of the mountains and he and Mary visited the Canadian Rockies every year until his untimely death in 1903.

Mary Schaffer returned to the mountains on her own the following year with her friend Mollie Adams. Guided by Tom Wilson and his associate Billy Warren, they explored the Yoho Valley and the Moraine Lake area. Returning again in 1905 and 1906, the ladies became more adventurous, travelling as far north as the Columbia Icefields. Then they began to plan a major expedition for the 1907 season.

It was definitely not the norm for two ladies of the Victorian age in their mid-forties to venture off into the mountain wilderness on a four-month pack trip, but these were not two traditional ladies. Over the years they had become kindred spirits, reinforcing the other's interests and determination. Their answer to those who said they should not go was, "Can the free air sully, can the birds teach us words we should not hear, can it be possible to see, in such a summer's outing, one sight as painful as the daily ones of poverty, degradation, and depravity of a great city?"²⁶

Their plan was to visit the headwaters of the Saskatchewan and Athabasca rivers, but they also hoped to reach a lake they had heard of that was called Chaba Imne (Beaver Lake) by the Stoney Indians. Later she revealed that, "our real objective was to delve into the heart of an untouched land, to turn the unthumbed pages

of an unread book, and to learn daily those secrets which dear Mother Nature is so willing to tell to those who seek."²⁷

They reached the Athabasca River and travelled upstream to Mount Columbia, but an attempt to find the lake failed when they encountered heavy snow as the end of the season approached. During their return to the railway, Mary Schaffer met a band of Stoneys and had dinner with them at the home of Elliott Barnes on the Kootenai Plains in the Saskatchewan River valley. One of the Indians was Samson Beaver who as a boy of 14 had visited the legendary lake with his father nearly 20 years previously. From memory, he sketched a map showing the route.

The winter was spent dreaming of the elusive lake with the, "determination to find our way to it if another summer dawned for us... all four of us had the same goal in mind the moment there came a chance of pushing towards it."²⁸ With Samson's precious map in hand and Billy Warren and Sid Unwin as guides, the determined ladies set out from Lake Louise on June 8, 1908. Almost a month later they finally reached their lake, probably the first to see it since Henry MacLeod's visit in 1875. Following several days of exploration in the area, the party spent five days attempting to push a trail through the thick, downed timber of the Maligne River valley to the Athabasca River. Finally they gave up and retraced their steps to the upper Athabasca. Then they journeyed northwest as far as Tete Jaune Cache before returning to Lake Louise on September 20.

Clearly, this was a remarkable trip and the two ladies were given much recognition for their efforts, although they in turn gave much of the credit to their guides. Mary Schaffer's book, *Old Indian Trails of the Canadian Rockies*, was published in 1911 and is regarded as a classic.

Mary Schaffer returned to the Rockies each summer until 1912 when she purchased a cottage in Banff and made her home among the mountains. Three years later she and her long-time guide and companion Billy Warren were married. Billy Warren became a successful businessman in Banff.

No other location in the Canadian Rockies is so closely identified with a single individual as Maligne Lake and its panorama. Mount Schaffer, however, is located between Lake O'Hara and Lake McArthur in Yoho National Park.



Mary Schaffer and Billy Warren. Courtesy Whyte Museum, V439 PS-6.

Sidney Unwin



Sidney Unwin. Courtesy Whyte Museum, NA-66-496.

“Unsurpassed in woodcraft and resourcefulness, unequalled in thoughtful kindness to his party, and with the charm of courteous manner that adds the final touch of perfection to the little self-centred microcosm that a party in the wilderness constitutes.”²⁹ This was the tribute paid to Sid Unwin by B. W. Mitchell following several trips in the Rockies with this legendary outfitter.

Regarded as one of the most capable of the trail guides during the years of exploration in the Canadian Rockies, Sid Unwin lived an adventurous but short life. Born in London, England, he was for some reason drawn to the mountains of Canada where he set up a guide and outfitting business and spent the winters trapping in the Mistaya Valley near Waterfowl Lakes. While crossing Bow Lake one winter afternoon, the ice broke beneath him and, with a heavy pack and snowshoes he “felt for a minute that it was all over. Then it came to me that I just couldn’t die yet. I’m young and life is good.”³⁰ An incredible effort must have been required to save himself. After regaining the ice surface, he struggled to the shore, his clothes frozen stiff, and with matches from a waterproof metal box he carried just for such emergencies he lit a whole tree on fire to get warm. Then he built a bonfire, disrobed and dried his clothes.

In 1908 Sid was one of the guides for Mary Schaffer and Mollie Adams as they set out to search for the lake now known as Maligne. After struggling for days through burnt-out forests, they began to descend the Maligne River from Maligne Pass. The party was becoming dispirited and beginning to doubt the accuracy of the map they were following. After stopping for lunch Sid abruptly announced, “I’m going off to climb something that’s high enough to see if that lake’s within twenty miles of here and I’m not coming back till I know!”³¹ On his return to camp at 10:30 that night, all were excited to hear that he had climbed a mountain to the east of their camp (Mount Unwin) and was able to look down upon the elusive lake they were seeking. Later they all enjoyed the explorations of the longest lake in the Rockies. Together with Mary Schaffer, Sid returned to the lake in 1911 to complete a more detailed survey of the area at the request of the Parks Department.

Sid Unwin’s adventures in the tranquillity of the Canadian Rockies were preceded and followed by other adventures

amongst the horrors of war. Prior to coming to Canada he had fought with distinction in the South African War. Then, when the First World War broke out in 1914 he asked his sister Ethel to take over his pack and saddle-horse business and enlisted in the Canadian Army, which assigned him to the 20th Artillery Battery at Lethbridge. In January 1916, the battery saw its first action in France and a year-and-a-half later during the Battle of Vimy Ridge, Sid was severely wounded after single-handedly manning an artillery battery. The position was being shelled and Sid ordered all his men to leave the battery and go back to their dugout. Sid did all the loading and firing single-handedly even when one of his ammunition pits was set on fire by a direct hit. Lieutenant E. K. Carmichael, Sid’s commanding officer, wrote, “I was so much pleased with, and admired his conduct, that I committed the circumstances to paper at once in case of accidents, so that if anything did happen to me, the paper would bear witness.”³² Sid later died of his injuries in a military hospital.

A last letter, written in a left-handed scrawl from a military hospital, proved that his spirit had not been broken: “Aside from having my right arm blown off, being almost stone deafened by shell fire, and having my head full of shrapnel fragments, I’m fine and dandy.”³³ Despite his desire to serve his country and his indomitable spirit while in the horrid trenches of France, he must have longed to return to the days he spent sailing *HMS Chaba* on Maligne Lake.



Right: Mount Unwin.