

A Historic View: Climbing in the Birthplace of the “Japanese Alps”

Modern alpinism in Japan began in the Chubusangaku National Park with the arrival of European mountaineers in the Meiji era (1868–1912). But as in other regions of Japan, climbing in these mountains has its roots in the country’s indigenous religion, which deifies natural phenomena, including mountain peaks. Some areas had already become pilgrimage destinations or special sites where priests underwent strenuous ascetic training.

The first ascent of Mt. Yarigatake, the centerpiece of the Northern Alps, was made in 1828 by a Buddhist priest named Banryu. Besides ascetics, the mountains were also the domain of woodcutters and hunters, and one hunter named Kamijo Kamonji is now famed for guiding the first non-Japanese climber, William Gowland, to the peak of Mt. Yarigatake in 1877. Gowland was a British engineer and archaeologist, one of the many international experts invited to Japan to help with industrialization during the Meiji era. He was also an enthusiastic climber, and the first use of the term “the Japanese Alps” appears in his writings.

It was another British climber, a missionary named Walter Weston, who introduced Japan’s mountains to the world. After climbing several of the Northern Alps’ peaks, he wrote a book titled *Mountaineering and Exploration in the Japanese Alps*, which was published in London in 1896. Like his compatriot, he was guided by Kamonji, for whom he expressed high praise in the book.

Mountaineering became an increasingly popular activity as Europeans introduced alpine techniques and climbing gear into the country. The Japanese Alpine Club was founded in 1905, and the first university alpine club was founded at Keio University in 1915. The sport quickly spread all over the country, and peak after peak and route after route were conquered by enthusiastic climbers. Today, thanks to constant conservation efforts and the well-run system of trails and huts, there are innumerable destinations for hikers.