

The Weston Memorial

Reverend Walter Weston (1861–1940) was a Church of England missionary and alpinist who arrived in Japan in 1888, working first in Kumamoto and Kobe, and later in Yokohama. He spent 15 years in Japan and developed a keen interest in its landscapes, traditions, people, culture, and above all, its mountains. Weston is remembered as “the father of mountaineering in Japan” and memorialized by a plaque set in a rock face on the north side of the Azusa River, a 20-minute walk from Kappa Bridge. Erected by the Japan Alpine Club in 1937, it celebrates Weston’s life and success in giving universal currency to the name “Japanese Alps.”

Before he arrived in Japan, the Cambridge-educated Weston had climbed extensively in the Swiss Alps. He brought his passion here to the Japanese Alps, which he explored over a four-year period with local guide and friend Kamijō Kamonji (1847–1917), a hunter and mountaineer. Weston loved the local peaks, which he described as possessing “a grandeur and a wildness” that he seldom found in Japan. He scaled Mt. Yari in 1892, as well many others. In 1896, after returning to England, he published *Mountaineering and Exploring in the Japanese Alps*, which introduced the region to the English-speaking world.

In Japan, Reverend Weston’s greatest legacy lies in introducing the concept of mountaineering for pleasure rather than for economic purposes or spiritual practice. It was a novel idea at the time, and his forays to the peaks were sometimes met with confusion. In *Mountaineering and Exploring*, Weston describes the initial reactions of the local people: “[T]hey began to ply me with questions. ‘Have you come to search for silver mines?’ ‘No, then it must be crystals?’ That I was simply climbing for pleasure I found it very hard to persuade them.”

Weston went on to become the first honorary member of the Japan Alpine Club in 1906, and in 1939 received the Order of the Sacred Treasure (fourth class) from Emperor Hirohito. Even now, the legacies of Weston and Kamijō Kamonji endure in Kamikōchi. The Kamonjigoya Hut near Myōjin Pond is still run by Kamonji’s fourth-generation descendant, and the Weston Festival is held on the first Sunday in June.

The rock in which the Weston Memorial is embedded has recently drawn the interest of geologists, who believe it to be the world’s youngest example of granodiorite, a type of igneous rock.