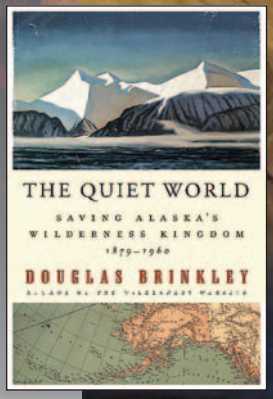
The Quiet World: Saving Alaska's Wilderness Kingdom, 1879-1960

By Douglas Brinkley

In this fascinating follow-up to his New York Times bestseller *Wilderness Warrior*, acclaimed historian Douglas Brinkley offers a riveting, expansive look at the past and present battle to preserve Alaska's wilderness. Brinkley explores the colorful diversity of Alaska's wildlife, arrays the forces that have wreaked havoc on its primeval arctic refuge—from Klondike Gold Rush prospectors to environmental disasters like the Exxon-Valdez oil spill—and documents environmental heroes from Theodore Roosevelt to Dwight Eisenhower and beyond. Not merely a record of Alaska's past, *Quiet World* is a compelling call-to-arms for sustainability, conservationism, and conscientious environmental stewardship—a warning that the land once called Seward's Folly may go down in history as America's Greatest Mistake.



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Boone and Crockett Club Member

Charles Sheldon's Fierce Fight

An Excerpt from *The Quiet World: Saving Alaska's Wilderness Kingdom, 1879-1960*

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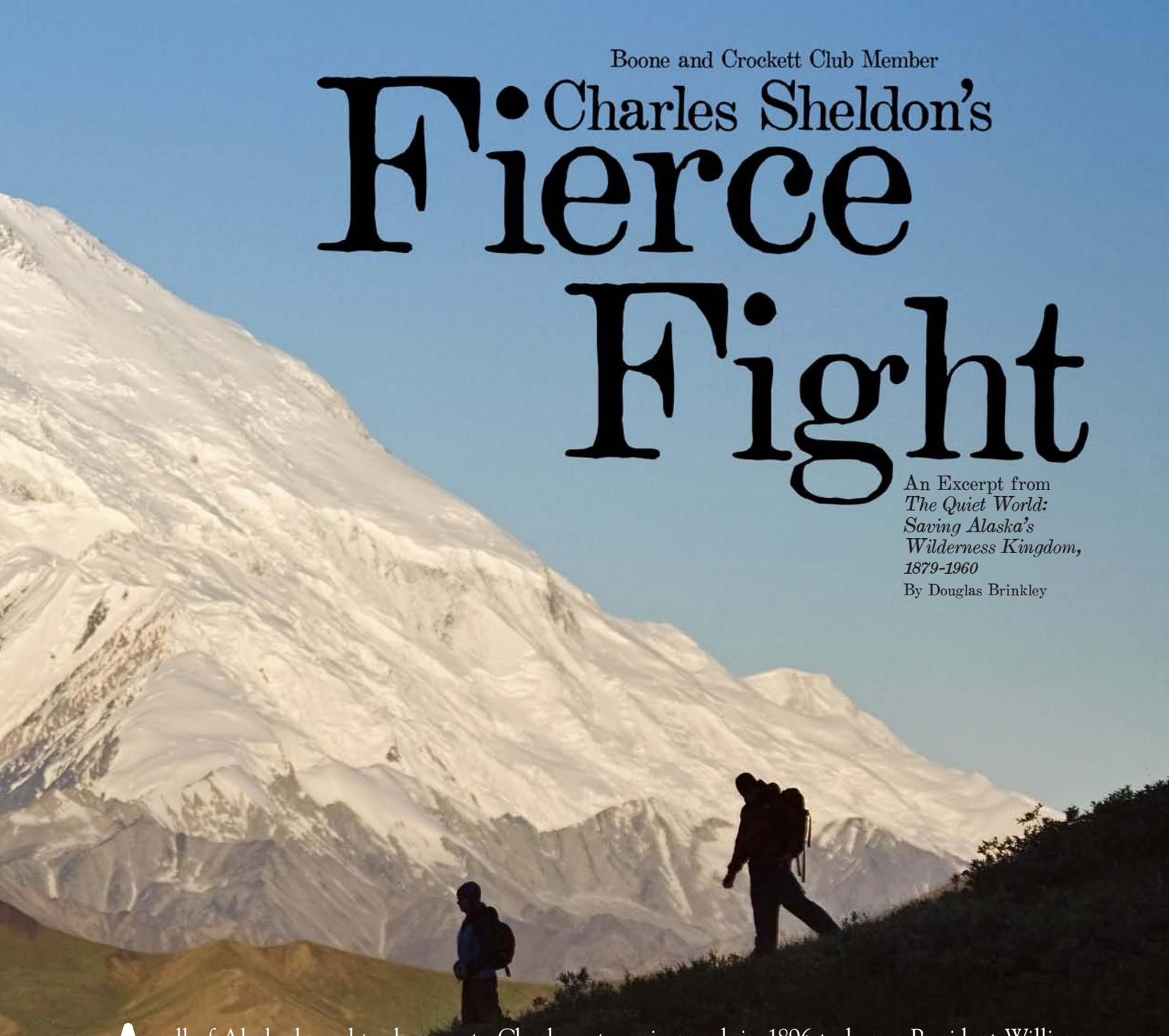

All of Alaska brought a bounce to Charles Sheldon's marching-man gait. Like a protagonist in a James Oliver Curwood novel, he believed that every inch of the vast territory was Edenic. But it was 20,320-foot Mount McKinley, its peak blanketed in deep perpetual snow, that left Sheldon in utter awe. Just looking at McKinley—which he first saw in mid-July 1906 from a hilltop near Wonder Lake—seemed to lower Sheldon's blood pressure and heart rate. Time stood still within a fifty-mile circumference around the base. Even in summer, the temperature of the mountain, wrapped with storm clouds and mist, frequently dropped below zero Fahrenheit. Gold prospectors had named the towering peak in 1896 to honor President William McKinley. The name stuck. To the Athabascan Indians, however, the peak was Denali ("The Great One"). Sheldon used the Indian name (although he sometimes simply said "The Mountain"). The south peak was the highest point in North America. To Sheldon the whole area around Mount McKinley—the huge glaciers, the trough-like gorges, the miles of tundra stretching out to meet other mountains on the horizon—was his beloved "Denali wilderness." The Alaska Range dwarfed the Colorado Rockies to foothill status. In terms of its sheer rise from base to summit Mount McKinley was the tallest mountain in the world.

Traveling around the Denali wilderness, Sheldon was like a cowboy riding through a cattle ranch in Texas and eyeing his herd, except that Sheldon's cattle were migratory caribou. From halfway up the mountain the caribou looked like ants. In his field journals he waxed eloquent about these caribou herds and told of risking his life to study grizzlies. Unlike the slopes in the Lower Forty-Eight, the Alaska Range—home to 161 species of birds and thirty-seven of mammals—was not heavily forested; it was primarily blanketed by snow and ice. Besides protecting wildlife, Sheldon also wanted to ensure that the large quantities of hemlock, birch, poplar, alder, and willow surrounding McKinley didn't become cordwood. Alaska had more than 450 types of plants that botanists believed might be potential medicines. He feared that the Alaska Railroad line connecting Fairbanks to Seward—completed in 1914—would forever ruin the Denali wilderness. Yet he recognized that because McKinley was between the two cities, the railroad would make the national park a convenient stopover. "To America's fledgling conservationists, railroads were synonymous with wildfire, destruction," the historian Tom Walker wrote in McKinley Station "Enter the railroad-gone the wildlife: gone the frontier."

For Sheldon the best places in the Western hemisphere were those where the wind velocity had rip-roaring power. The Denali valleys, he said, were like swells in the ocean, boundless and breathtaking. Those who heard his appeal were instantly ready to purchase a one-way ticket to Alaska. Private gentlemen's clubs—the most elite in America, such as the Cosmos and the Century—wanted Sheldon as a lifetime member. Poised and always adaptable, comfortable both at the Metropolitan Opera and curing fish with Native Alaskans in the Kenai Peninsula, Sheldon added both hardiness and élan to any conversation, luncheon, or campfire. Alaska, he avidly declared, was the escapist tonic for any urban dweller sick and tired of the rat race. The hummocks, tangled streams, and forested rivers allow a somnambulistic urbanite a chance to follow his inner compass. Self-possessed when writing about Alaska, full of perspicacity, Sheldon charmingly made first-person declarations about my wilderness, my river, and my country to express his deep love for the sprawling territory. Back in New York, he would always tell friends that he'd left his heart in Alaska. For Sheldon the Alaskan wilderness was not a tooth-and-claw setting for the defiance of death as it had been to Jack London and Robert Service," the historian Roderick Frazier Nash wrote in *Wilderness and the American Mind*. "He saw it as a frontier, but especially in regard to big game habitat, a perishable frontier that needed protection."

Sheldon's backwoods style enthralled Roosevelt, who saw him as a spiritual heir. Roosevelt, in fact, reviewed *The Wilderness of Upper Yukon* in the *Outlook*, declaring his young protégé, the new TR. "Mr. Charles Sheldon is a wilderness wanderer, who to the hardihood and prowess of the old-time hunter adds the capacity of a first-class field naturalist, and, also, what is just as important, the power of literary expression." Roosevelt wrote, "Such a man can do for the lives of the wild creatures of the wooded and mountainous wilderness what John Muir had done for the physical features of the wilderness His experiences of Alaska, and indeed the entire Northwest, are such as no other man has had, and no other writer on the subject has ever possessed both his power of observation and his power of recording vividly and accurately what he has seen."

Imbued with a visionary streak, Sheldon wasn't trying to present the wilderness in Alaska as a souvenir of the closed frontier. His importance to the history of conservation lay in his belief that the days if Kit Carson had passed, but that if the primitive arts were learned, a vibrant wilderness adventure could still be had. Much like the Camp Fire Club of America, which was created in 1897, Sheldon recognized that wildlife would survive the onslaught of civilization only if huge tracts of habitat were saved for certain species—an approach Roosevelt had pioneered with bison near Fort Sill, Oklahoma.

Sheldon, having completed his apprenticeship in Mexico and Alaska, soon became a transformational leader in the conservationist movement of the progressive era. He was elected an officer in the Boone and Crockett Club, National Parks Association, and American Forestry Association, among numerous other preservationist-minded organizations. From the outset, Dr. C. Hart Merriam of the Biological Survey respected Sheldon for treating the natural world with humility and restraint. Roosevelt, in fact, saw Sheldon, whom he deemed "a capital representative of the best hunter-naturalist type today," as almost a member of his extended family. Roosevelt often turned to Sheldon to serve on various wildlife committees of the Boone and Crockett Club. Because Dr. Merriam had failed to finish his magnum opus North American Mammals, Roosevelt started hinting that perhaps Sheldon should step up and fill the void. While Sheldon never produced such a comprehensive study, he led the movement for America to adopt progressive game laws.

What haunted Sheldon, making him see the with anger, was the gradual diminution of the larger mammals such as Dall's sheep, moose, and deer as a result of market hunting across the tundra-covered valley. Sometimes, even when he was hungry and miserable, Sheldon nevertheless counted and collected for the Biological Survey. Only the thick swarms of biting flies and insomnia during the summer solstice really hindered him. Driven by his love of the outdoors, Sheldon, when the creeks were down and the trails melted out, kept biological diaries of his pioneering wildlife observational research on the northern slopes of the Alaska Range. "Complete enjoyment of the wilderness," Sheldon wrote, "needs periods of solitude." Being alone at the high altitude gives a person plenty of free time to think. Sheldon began dreaming of the Denali wilderness as a national park—the largest in the system, millions of protected acres. Guide Harry Karstens' journal entry of January 12, 1908, records Sheldon's first hope that the U.S. government would maintain Denali National Park as a quasi-wilderness area (i.e., roadless).

As reflected in Karstens' remembrances, Sheldon was determined to see Mount McKinley saved as a kind of Grand Canyon of the north—a protected American wonder, a true wilderness area untouched by axes or construction crews where a citizen could go and get lost. To his mind only one two-lane road should be allowed to cut through the park. Mount McKinley, he said, was an inheritance for his grandchildren.

When Sheldon returned to New York before Christmas 1908, invigorated by the stinging snows of Denali, he almost singlehandedly launched a campaign to create a national park around Mount McKinley. He was the best cheerleader wild Alaska ever had. The bird flocks in the area, he said, were loud enough to throw an orchestra out of tune. The salmon-rich rivers had the cleanest, purest water that ever rushed over rocks. To see a double rainbow over the Teklanika River at summer twilight was proof that the world had a Creator. Painting word pictures, Sheldon told his audiences about seeing Mount McKinley free of clouds, lording it over the adjacent snow-clad summits, as grizzly bears patrolled the base. The great Muldrow Glacier falling down the eastern side from the snowfield between the two domes, he claimed, was one of the great sights in nature. What worried Sheldon was that hunters were slaughtering more and more game to feed mountain-ringed towns such as Nenana, Kantishna, and more distant Fairbanks. As a purist with regard to nature reserves, he disdained the fifty backwoods stump mills, placer operations, and forest "units"

earmarked for cutting. Once the railroad came, connecting Seward to Fairbanks, additional market-hunting syndicates would patrol the Denali wilderness and kill everything that moved.

It had taken George Bird Grinnell a full nineteen years to see Glacier National Park become a reality. But Sheldon, who always believed luck was on his side, was determined to obtain the designation within a decade. Recognizing that securing congressional approval was tough sledding, Sheldon began intensely lobbying the heavyset James Wickersham, Alaska territory's only delegate on Capitol Hill, a quasi-Rooseveltian conservationist.

Sheldon's arduous treks across the Alaska Range over glaring snowfields in icy gales, counting caribou and Dall's sheep, had paid off for America and the world.

Something about Sheldon's fervor for protecting Alaska's wildlife heritage was very appealing in the age of Model T's, telephone wires, catch-penny devices, skyscrapers, soap bubbles, and the Wright brothers. What could be more American than a huge brown bear feeding on salmon in a fast-moving stream or a bull moose bedding down under a pine?

At meetings of the Boone and Crockett Club, Sheldon planned with friends exactly how to create a vast national park reserve the size of his home state, Vermont—a park to be run by the U.S. Department of the Interior. They got Stephen Mather, the director of the National Park Service, to sign on, with huge enthusiasm.

Sheldon did a convincing job of presenting the Denali area to the Department of the Interior as a teeming and impressive land. Helping the lobbying, and arriving at just the right time, was a memoir by the mountaineer Belmore Browne, *The Conquest of Mount McKinley* (1913), complete with anecdotes about mushing behind a team of dogs over high mountain passes. Ever since the nomadic Yupik and Inupiat brought dogsleds from Siberia to Alaska, mushing had become a preferred and practical mode of transportation across the wilderness territory. Declawed, their incisors pulled, sometimes even castrated, Eskimo dogs (or malamutes) had an inbred sense of direction and made winter travel feasible in Alaska. Arctic explorers such as Leopold McClintock and Fridtjof Nansen had popularized these dogs in their adventure sagas. Jack London transformed them into symbols of the far north in *The Call of the Wild*. In 1908 Nome inaugurated the All-Alaskan Sweepstakes, a sporting event that eventually led to the Iditarod race. And now Browne, in *The Conquest of Mount McKinley*, presented these dogs as heroic mountain climbers, thus helping Sheldon's proposed national park get extra newspaper coverage in the Atlantic coast states.

Browne's unanticipated assistance convinced Sheldon of a political truth: if you stuck to your guns long enough in America, right would eventually prevail. Sensing an opportune moment, Sheldon wrote to Dr. Edward W. Nelson at the Biological Survey that the time had come to push the legislation for Denali National Park through Congress—the letter was dated October 10, 1915. This document was the opening salve of a fierce legislative tussle. Sheldon's journals about Denali, in fact, were now carefully studied by U.S. congressmen as clear-eyed dispatches from "The roof of the continent." Every page, it was quickly understood, constituted a first-rate argument for the wilderness and wildlife preservation rather than logging in the Denali region.

Sheldon finally achieved his goal in 1917. After a flurry of last-minute negotiations about railroad entry and hunting laws, and after crucial lobbying by the Boone and Crockett Club and the Camp Fire Club of America, Congress presented Sheldon with an approved bill. Immediately, document in hand, Sheldon hurried to the White House, hoping to speed up the signing process. On February 26, President Wilson at last approved the legislation to create Mount McKinley National Park. He invited the jubilant Sheldon to attend the official signing ceremony at the White House. Sheldon's arduous treks across the Alaska Range over glaring snowfields in icy gales, counting caribou and Dall's sheep, had paid off for America and the world. The U.S. government had finally recognized his vision of Mount McKinley—and the beautiful raw-bone foothills of the Alaska Range—as belonging to every citizen. Laws associated with the new national park complemented Sheldon's vision: no market hunters, no gold prospectors, and no oil-field geologist would be allowed in the million-acre wilderness.

But there were some problems. For one thing, Congress rejected the name Denali in favor of Mount McKinley National Park. Sheldon and others were annoyed. Congress also refused to appropriate new money to protect Mount McKinley from the poaching of wildlife and timber. All President Wilson and Congress had really agreed to was a template for protection. With no funds set aside for the long-term of Mount McKinley, Sheldon knew the Denali wilderness wouldn't last long. Conservationist activism was a constant experience of tribulations. Disappointed, Sheldon tapped the Boone and Crockett Club for $8,000 so that the Department of the Interior could hire a superintendent for Mount McKinley.

Because of Sheldon's public promotion of Mount McKinley, tourists started trickling in—very slowly—to see it. Only seven visitors came to see the new national park in 1922. In 1923 the Curry Hotel opened in time for the park's formal dedication. A scenic viewpoint—the "Regal Vista"—was established so that tourists could snap photographs of McKinley without an arduous hike.

The only newspaper that seemed to care about the new national park was the Brooklyn Daily Eagle. Not until 1924, when roads and concessions were built, did the number of visitors increase. Stephen Mather lobbied aggressively for congressional allocations to help the park develop infrastructure. A log structure (looking rather like a strip mall) became the tourist gateway of McKinley Station: it comprised a roadhouse, a general store, a post office, a public garden, and little log motel cabins to rent. The Alaska Railroad, working closely with the National Park Service, printed attractive brochures and extolled the run from Seward to Fairbanks as the "Mount McKinley Route."

As the historian Alfred Runte noted in National Parks: The American Experience, the new park met the major preservationist criterion of the era: "monumentalism." ■