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# Issues

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## The Evolution of Exploration

I'm not sure how many climbers still read the books of the botanist and explorer Frank Kingdon-Ward. He was a prolific writer, particularly about the Himalaya, publishing 25 books in 50 years, the last of them appearing in 1960, two years after his death. The best known is probably the description of his greatest piece of exploration *The Riddle of the Tsangpo Gorges*, published in 1926. The recent flurry of exploration in this region has reawakened some level of interest in Kingdon-Ward among the public. But, for the most part, he is known mostly to those with an interest in plant-hunting.

Kingdon-Ward was a great intellectual speculator but some of his ideas about the origins of man are engagingly loopy. In the autumn of 1940 he argued in the *Daily Telegraph* that the war had been caused by a resurgence of the Neanderthal strain in the blood not just of the German nation but the Russians too. Far from being wiped out by *Homo sapiens*, Neanderthals had interbred, particularly in Northern Europe, where their lumpen character had survived: 'We cannot get away from the horrible truth that behind the immense glittering façade of Western culture lurks the black shadow of Neanderthal man. The cold ferocity, the snarling rage, the sterile sadism, the grunting sensuality we see all around in Central Europe today are, in the literal meaning of the words, brutal and inhuman.'

The Teuton and the Slav, Kingdon-Ward argued, preferred ideals that are 'always animal' and he saw the struggle of the Allies to defeat Germany as the opportunity to 'cleansing the Earth of this foul taint'. (Of course, the Nazis were writing similar things about the Jews. Empathy with a fellow human is strong, even among soldiers during a war, so those prosecuting aggression dehumanise the enemy, make them subhuman and therefore easier to annihilate. We are all capable of racism, unless we talk ourselves out of it.)

Kingdon-Ward was echoing views widely held at that time about the Neanderthals, who have shared the Philistine's poor reputation. But Neanderthal 'cold ferocity' and 'snarling rage' are no more than stories, narratives spun from scanty evidence to convince ourselves that *Homo sapiens* is an improvement, that we are in fact nature's ultimate achievement. There is still much to discover about Neanderthals, but we know more now than we did in 1940. For instance, their brains were bigger than ours, and far from being brutish, current academic opinion holds that they were largely peaceful. Humans and Neanderthals coexisted for millennia before the latter died out, as they surely did. There is little evidence that these two hominids interbred.

I don't wish to mock Kingdon-Ward's ideas, because at least he was thinking widely, and that is what I want to do now, in attempting to offer an evolutionary explanation for why someone might want to go climbing. I imagine more pragmatic readers who get this far will be grinding their teeth at the prospect of another essay about the 'why', preferring the 'how' and 'what'. Climbing, they will argue, is a personal choice made for a million different reasons and to analyse why someone should do it is to deny our basic individuality. Besides, they say, we have better things to do with our time. All I can do in response is wave them a fond farewell.

The origins of climbing are often explained as a confluence of several strands in economic and intellectual change in Europe in the nineteenth century. Romanticism and the sense of the sublime, for example, put mountains back on the map as a landscape worthy of intellectual consideration. Improved communications and disposable income allowed the English upper-middle class to take extended holidays in the Alps. The growing culture of scientific enquiry saw the mountains as an opportunity to explore new worlds of understanding like geology and geography.

That conventional view is not incorrect, and was most recently explained in Robert Macfarlane's new book *Mountains of the Mind*. But for me, these are proximate causes of how climbing came about, not the deeper, underlying roots within human nature itself that drive some of us to do these things. You could argue that new conditions in society led to a new activity – mountain climbing – and that is all the explanation you need. But for me that argument is woefully inadequate. It's like explaining how a car works when you're attempting to describe the excitement of driving fast.

For most people, mountaineering is a nonsensical activity, which is why we often find ourselves explaining why we do it. It's dangerous, physically demanding and apparently without reward. What's the appeal? In response, I usually ask people what is the point of opera, or *haute cuisine*, or clubbing.

'But those things are fun!' they argue, before getting the point and thinking us weird for finding risk and discomfort enjoyable.

George Mallory made the same point more forcibly. 'What we get from this adventure is just sheer joy. And joy is, after all, the end of life. We do not live to eat and make money. We eat and make money to be able to enjoy life. That is what life means and what life is for.'

Climbing, Mallory seems to be saying in his passionate, impulsive response, is just another part of human culture, which is as various and complex as anything we can imagine. The human brain is the most complex thing in the universe we've yet discovered. But human history is much more than the activity of one mind in isolation. The confluence of many human brains with apparently limitless combinations over a long period of time has produced activities spanning meditation to wild excess, from Bach to Jane's Addiction, from Mrs Tiggywinkle to Genghis Khan and everything in between. (One thing we know about Neanderthals is that their 'culture'

barely changed in tens of thousands of years. We may have lived next door to them, but I doubt I would have gone round for dinner more than once.)

But while all this reveals the diversity of human culture, it doesn't explain why mountain climbing *per se* should be attractive to some human minds. To begin my explanation of that, I'm going to turn back to Kingdon-Ward and his vagrant mind. Among his literary output was a slim volume called *Modern Exploration*, which was an attempt to explain and analyse the history and future of our slow spread over the planet's surface, and by analogy the growth of human knowledge. I was most attracted by his chapter 'The Evolution of Exploration', not because of what it contained, but simply for the idea itself.

In this chapter, Kingdon-Ward never questions the supremacy of Western civilisation and believes that exploration only really started after the rise of urban culture, which in the 1920s was thought to have begun exclusively in the Middle East several millennia before the birth of Christ. Other 'races', he says, have been colonised by Western cultures because their 'civilisations' are not as developed; it has been left largely to Christians and Muslims to explore our world because we are superior.

That view was typical of a man of his class and upbringing, but it has been more or less discounted and quite rightly so. I am not going to rehearse the arguments now, but Jared Diamond's sweeping overview of human development *Guns, Germs and Steel* is the best explanation of how, largely by chance, one group of humans has come to dominate economically the rest of the world.

What appealed to me about the phrase 'Evolution of Exploration' was its acknowledgement that exploration had adapted over the years to meet different circumstances at different moments in history. All human culture has done this: religion, philosophy, music and so on. Why should exploration be any different? Richard Dawkins introduced the idea of the 'meme' in his book *The Selfish Gene*, a meme being a package of cultural information that thrives and mutates in the same way that an organism does. Exploration is simply another meme.

Kingdon-Ward believed that 'mountaineering is not exploration' and so devoted little attention to it in his book. In a way he was right. We typically see exploration as the discovery of previously unknown country for economic, political or religious benefit. Biologists may see it as the acquisition of resources. Successful groups of humans, whether these are nations or religious institutions, are resource vacuums. South American Indians understood that intimately, even as they were annihilated.

Climbing, surely, has little to do with these great currents of history. What does the colonisation of the Americas have to do with an eccentric, little-known sport in nineteenth-century Europe? What 'resources' are gained from climbing a mountain? Later, I shall argue that the 'resources' are often more connected to our self-esteem and appeal as individuals – although

money does come into it. But first, it's worth reviewing just how old our sport is.

Go back further than the rise of urban culture to before recorded history. Imagine the slow spread of humanity, from its source in the Rift Valley along the coastlines of the Earth's landmass. Within the period of a few tens of millennia, a species, which had faced near extinction, reduced at one stage to a small band of perhaps a few hundred individuals by disease and predation, managed to colonise the entire planet.

Language, the ability to communicate learning, must lie at the heart of our success. But our long journey required considerable exploratory skill as well. Each desert was new, every jungle held unknown dangers. Long before the rise of the nation state, or of cities, or of agriculture, small bands of humans were spreading down the coasts of the Americas, the last Continent to be reached. They would have met threats they barely understood and would have needed to adapt their way of life faster than the usual mechanisms of evolution could allow.

Consider the difference in technological ability between, for example, Arctic Inuit and Aborigines in Australia. And yet the genetic difference between them is minuscule. Our adaptability to circumstance lies in the way our brains work. Over hundreds of thousands of years, we have learned how to create an environment in which we can survive and then thrive. We do not rely on a particular niche, like a lion or an ant, we use our brains to make it how we like it. As long as there is enough to drink and eat, then we can live there.

All kinds of physical environments have been exploited for their resources, including cliffs and mountains. We think of climbing as being a thoroughly modern invention, but in fact we must acknowledge that the activity is much older than the sport, and has been used to exploit untapped resources by people who had no other option.

Let me give you a couple of examples. Last year I explored the coast around the Spanish port of Javea, at Cape Nao. The neighbourhood at Cape Nao is the wealthiest on this part of the coast, a kind of Costa Blanca Marbella. It's hard to conceive, barrelling up the A7 from Alicante, that this was once one of Europe's most economically deprived regions. (Now it is simply one of the ugliest.) For those without access to capital, making a living was a desperate struggle.

Access to the sea was restricted to those who could afford a boat, so those without capital chose to fish instead from the cliffs around Cape Nao, a small niche that no one had yet claimed as their own. The closest climbing these days is on the Peñon d'Ifach at Calpe a few miles south. But while the Peñon is bigger, the cliffs at Cape Nao are still 300ft high and very steep. I imagine the rock is too loose to attract many climbers – think Gogarth on a bad-hair day. Yet this was where Javea's poorest went to work. Using wood and bamboo, ropes woven from the dried leaves of a local date palm and big metal pegs hammered into cracks the fishermen

produced the ultimate artificial routes. Most of them have now rotted away but from the belvedere on Cape Nao you can still see the odd ladder. Tourists must wonder what they are doing perched in the middle of gigantic cliffs.

The Spanish historian Toni Barber has maintained one of these fishing 'routes' as a kind of a museum to this remarkable industry. His friend José Miguel García, a climbing guide from Sella, took us to a less developed stretch of the coast and we bushwhacked across steep slopes of loose limestone to a cave perched above another colossal drop. This was where the fishermen would pause before starting down.

A thick iron spike marked the top of the line and José swung onto it and climbed down, perched on little globs of cement stuck to the rock, clipping his rope into the rusting garbage buried in the cracks. The cliff dropped away below his feet to the sea, which sucked and blew around its base. A short ladder had been lain across an overhang. It creaked and shifted as José settled his weight onto each rung. Then it was my turn.

It was quite a trip. Although I was clipped into José's line I still felt horribly frightened. Nothing seemed solid and I gripped the bizarre collection of electrical flexes and bits of wood and wire with complete trepidation. Little nicks had been chipped out of the rock or else I tiptoed on lumps of hastily spread cement. Below was nothing but the salt air. When I reached the broad ledge, José set off down the next vertical section of cliff to a longer and even more wretched ladder.

'Oh God,' I moaned to myself, 'this is turning into something monstrous.' Then José's rope ran out and soon after we were reduced to down-climbing slabs of friable rock, clinging to the rotten strands of line that hung from the cliff, still a hundred feet above the sea.

The fisherman who worked this route would climb down it each evening – alone. He would spend the whole night at the base of the cliff on a ledge built from bamboo and wood, hung from big iron hooks driven into the cliff. In the morning he would stow his ledge and climb back up with his catch before walking to market, some ten miles away. All along the cliff here and elsewhere on the coast were pitches like this, each one controlled, maintained, sometimes rented out to those too poor to equip routes for themselves. All the fishermen knew who worked which route.

The practice went on for generations – I still haven't found out how many – and ended only fifty or so years ago. It's likely that long before Haskett-Smith climbed Napes Needle, fishermen were descending these cliffs at harder grades out of economic necessity. And yet this world is now almost forgotten and without Toni Barber's interest and scholarship would have been completely so.

This experience made me recall a climbing trip I took to Mali and the huge sandstone towers near Hombori called collectively the Hand of Fatima. Villagers recounted the story of two brothers Ousmane and Maliki Zindo who, around 1900, scaled the cliffs solo collecting vulture eggs and marabou chicks. Both brothers ultimately fell to their deaths. The broken body of

one was found beneath Kaga Tondo with a bounty of eggs in the leather bag around his neck. He had reached the nests close to the summit, most likely through a combination of the west face and north pillar, climbing up to V+ in grade, unroped and barefoot. When the first Western climbers reached the summit, they found potsherds left by previous, forgotten generations.

You may argue that these men – ‘Known Unto God’, to coin a phrase – weren’t climbing for the same reasons as we do but I don’t accept that. Virginia Woolf might once have claimed that human nature changes, but it doesn’t, at least, not overnight. Only our own personal perspectives do. I felt, climbing down that cliff in Spain, a powerful connection to whoever it was that first came this way, just as I do on a route on Cloggy. (Where, of course, the botanist clergymen Williams and Bingley were climbing in 1798.)

If you can accept that the fishermen on the coast near Javea, or the young men of the Sahel, or the copper miners in Snowdonia were pioneers too, then you really do begin to see climbing as something deep and rich and very, very old. Because adapting to new environments is something humans have done throughout history, just to survive. Those Spanish fishermen were never in a guidebook, and were illiterate, so never wrote a journal of their exploits. But what they did was every bit as impressive as a thousand Napes Needles.

Of course, those forgotten adventurers quit that tough work as soon as something easier and better paid came along, whereas we actually pay to suffer in this way. Doesn’t that signal a major difference in motivation? I’m not sure. John Amatt, who made the first ascent of the Troll Wall in 1965, has said: ‘It is one of the great paradoxes of human existence that by nature we seek out comfort and predictability, using all of our financial resources and intellectual power to devise technologies that will make our lives easier and less stressful. The paradox is that once we have created the comfort we desire, we must leave it all behind if we are to move forward toward future opportunity.’

I think evolution solves this conundrum rather easily. We have an innate desire to seek security, both in terms of the resources we can draw on to survive and, critically, bring up children, and in security from threat. But we also have the tools to face an environment that is more dangerous than the one we have created for ourselves. Solving problems, facing risk and working as a team make us happy as individuals. They are their own reward. It is under these circumstances that our brains are doing what they are designed for. Take away risk and adventure – in their broadest meanings – and the kind of boredom that leads to drug abuse and joy-riding becomes a threat. But no one *wants* to live in a dangerous environment, at least not for long. Both Reinhold Messner and Doug Scott have written that the sweetest moment in an expedition is the moment just before you reach base camp, when the climb is almost over.



I remember interviewing the psychologist Steven Pinker and discussing with him the alleged crisis among men in modern Western society. He described to me the circumstances of our social groupings, under which we evolved. 'Small groups of men,' he said, 'working together in a risky environment to solve problems. That's what makes us happy.' It did sound remarkably familiar.

Think of Coleridge on Scafell in 1802. (Kubla Khan, rock climbing *and* a laudanum habit – that's my kind of man.) 'There is one sort of Gambling, to which I am much addicted,' he wrote to his lover Sara Hutchinson after his experience on Broad Stand. 'When I find it convenient to descend from a mountain, I am too confident and too indolent to look round about and wind about 'till I find a track or other symptom of safety; but I wander on, and where it is first *possible* to descend, there I go – relying upon fortune for how far down this possibility will continue.'

In other words, Coleridge delights in being reckless. (I love the phrase 'symptom of safety', treating security as though it were a disease.) He is caught up in emotion, half thrilled, half terrified, as he contemplates climbing and jumping between each terrace and ledge. Finally, the prospect of the next hard move is too much and he is forced to lie down to recover his equilibrium. 'O God, I exclaimed aloud – how calm, how blessed am I now – I know not how to proceed, how to return, but I am calm and fearless and confident.' This emotional state will be familiar to anyone who ever pushed their grade on a rock climb or on a mountain.

There remains one hole in this argument that I have yet to close. You might be persuaded that the activity of climbing matches some atavistic urge that our evolution has left instilled in each of us. But our lives are about much more than the acquisition and management of resources, aren't they? Isn't it rather dehumanising to see things in such general, reductionist terms? We feel more self-aware and happier as individuals from climbing. Why can't we leave it there?

I've avoided discussing philosophy so far, partly because I have read very little, and partly because I don't trust its value. The evolutionary biologist Edward O. Wilson once described philosophy as 'a series of failed models of the mind'. But philosophy is for many of us the first port of call when dealing with our psychology. After all, what else is there?

For most arts graduates of my generation, any discussion of psychology usually involves Freud and sometimes Jung, but as Gore Vidal once said of Freud, anyone who gets the Oedipus myth wrong can't be trusted to explain how our minds work. His obvious contribution was to make us consider how our subconscious mind, particularly with regard to sexual desire, underpins a great part of our behaviour and by extension our culture.

Far more persuasive for me on the subject of how our psychology is constructed are modern neuroscientists and philosophers like Michael S Gazzaniga and Daniel Dennett. The brain, they argue, is an organ shaped

by evolution and should be studied in that context. Their attempts, and the attempts of others like them, to explain the brain's function, which is the mind, are more rooted in evidence and experiment than that of traditional philosophy. They reveal us to be creatures not just concerned with having enough to eat, as Mallory agreed, but creating an identity for ourselves, telling the story of our own lives.

As humans we are caught between two opposing forces, the desire to be innovative and the desire to conform. If we are innovative, then we seem more attractive to potential mates, but we also risk the ridicule of the group, which can leave us isolated from the social support we need. Most of us play safe and choose the group. The truth is that very few humans are original. Rather, we are fast-followers, quick to capitalise on someone else's good idea, once we are sure it will work. ('The human mind,' Dennett once wrote rather cheerlessly, 'is a dunghill in which the larvae of other people's ideas thrive.' But then again, watching the fashion industry, perhaps he has a point.)

Climbing's image is of an exciting but dangerous enterprise that adds lustre to an individual's reputation as a risk-taker, someone who is determined to live life to the full. So many of us start in adolescence and young adulthood, looking for a sharply defined world in which we ourselves can be defined, a world that is brighter than the one we grew up in. Mountains become arenas in which we learn and tell our own stories.

The greatest climbers are those who are truly original, who climb new mountains or hard new routes in a pure style. But climbing is a little world, and ultimately a small but satisfying glimpse of heaven. I think George Mallory understood that, even as he created mountaineering's most enduring myth. Knowing John Maynard Keynes and the Bloomsbury set left him with the sense that the world he had chosen was too small to realise his ambition. Because the greatest explorers of all were never men seeking new shores or hacking through jungles. They were those with minds agile enough to discover what is both true and unknown, about both ourselves and the world we live in.