Reviews

MOUNTAIN LITERATURE FESTIVAL

Personal Recollections

Jim Curran

It seems quite extraordinary that for almost a third of my life I spent a day a year at the International Festival of Mountain Literature. Nineteen of these were held at Bretton Hall and two at Kendal. Now, the instigator, Terry Gifford, has relinquished the reins of the IFML and its like may never be seen again.

'Extraordinary', because it seems only last year that a small audience gathered in a strange, acoustically-challenged crescent-shaped room to hear Dave Cook set the bar so high with his lecture 'Running on Empty' that it was hard to imagine anyone challenging him. 'Extraordinary', because however hard I tried, Terry managed to hook me every year bar one, to attend (and I only escaped that by going to Patagonia). And most extraordinary because of the cast list that Terry invited, cajoled, bribed and, for all I know, blackmailed into performing to an increasingly knowledgeable audience. Suffice to say when your list of speakers has included Catherine Destivelle, Kurt Diemberger, Al Alvarez, Charlie Houston, Bob Bates, Paul Piana, Doug Scott, Chris Bonington, Paul Nunn and Walter Bonatti, you can call your festival 'International' without a qualm of conscience. Also, like both the Alpine and Climbers' Clubs, it was the first of its kind, so there was no need for 'British' or 'English' to qualify the title.

I have to confess that although the Festival had always had a strong Sheffield input, the so-called 'Sheffield Mafia' initially viewed it with deep suspicion and took a few years to admit both its importance and how enjoyable the day had become. Their misgivings were not entirely without foundation and I think it is only fair to say that over the years the event has featured a few pretentious and worse, boring events. There is often a thin line between intellectually challenging and self-indulgent posturing. The audience at Bretton were always amazingly tolerant and polite, sometimes too much so, and even in debate tended to be cowed into submission by the same old voices (Ken Wilson).

So what were the Festival's highlights? It would, I think, be cheating to look up the cast list year by year, so I will try to rely on my increasingly unreliable memory, on the basis that if I've forgotten a presentation it wasn't much good and vice versa. Likewise, there is no attempt at chronology.

Heading the list is, as already mentioned, the late Dave Cook, asking awkward questions of our elitist attitudes to sexism and racism. Gill Law-

rence, the following year, gave a spirited reply (embarrassing me in the process). Ed Drummond recited his poems from the top of a 40ft tripod. Johnny Dawes wrote an article set for him during the festival. He had three hours to write it. 'Climbers – their Writing and History' was delivered by economic historian, bon viveur and doyen of British mountaineering, Paul Nunn, whose death in 1995 left an un-fillable void.

As well as the lectures, there were other diversions. The winners of the *High* writing competition had their work read out by Ian Smith, who performed the duty throughout the Festival. The judges' verdict on the Boardman Tasker Award was repeated, normally a week later than the award itself, held in the London bastion of Charlotte Road. This was an event enjoyed more by the winner and the audience than the runners-up, who, if present, had to hear their work dismissed for the second time in a week (ok, I'll admit it, it was normally me).

Talking of the Boardman Tasker Award reminds me of another great highlight of the Festival, Harold Drasdo's hilarious reading 'On Falling Off' from his book *The Ordinary Route*. This, in all the years of Boardman Tasker judges' idiosyncratic choices, still takes the biscuit for the 'Best Book Not to be Shortlisted'. Indeed, re-reading it recently, I am amazed it didn't win. But there you go.

Terry normally managed to mount an exhibition of paintings at the Festival as well as musical interludes. This combined with decent breaks at lunch and teatimes and with a bookstall from Jarvis Books provided time for informal discussions and socialising. Terry always tried to make the day as full as possible, and for many of us the breaks were as good as the presentations.

As the Festival's reputation spread the speakers also grew in stature. Charlie Houston and Bob Bates, both in their eighties, gave a memorable joint performance, re-living their K2 adventures, as did Kurt Diemberger. Al Alvarez was persuaded to come up from Hampstead and maintained that Apsley Cherry-Garrard's *The Worst Journey in the World* was the only example of the Festival genre he could think of that counted as real literature, a view hotly contested by the audience (and Ken Wilson).

Chris Bonington gave a surprisingly personal and emotional account of how his huge output of writing has evolved, even if it didn't rate too highly on the Alvarez scale of literary worth. And then there was Walter Bonatti, Terry's greatest coup. Unfortunately the Festival that year was held in Leeds University in a huge freezing cold auditorium, but Bonatti gave a superb and riveting performance, even though he needed an interpreter.

As well as the 'heavy duty' performers, Terry has always given us fun and humour from a diverse set of personalities. Maggie Body's life of editing climbing giants stands out, as does Steve Ashton's theatrical performances, Rosie Smith's irreverent songs and Sid Marty, from the Canadian Rockies, whose dry wit entertained us on several occasions. And when scraping the barrel, Terry occasionally had to resort to this writer for some low humour.

So, life goes on; nothing stays the same etc etc, and Terry's Festival is

no exception. On behalf of everyone who made up the audience at Bretton Hall, a big thank you to Terry for all your efforts in bringing us such a rich orgy of stars (many of whom came to my house later, but that's another story).

BOARDMAN TASKER AWARD 2008

The Boardman Tasker Award for Mountain Literature for 2008 was won by Andy Kirkpatrick for *Psychovertical*, reviewed in this *AJ* by Jim Curran. It was Kirkpatrick's first book and he enthusiastically pocketed the winner's cheque of £3,000.

Three of the other four shortlisted books are also reviewed here: Jonathan Trigell's novel *Cham* (Serpent's Tail), Frank Westerman's *Ararat* (Harvill Secker) and Maurice Isserman and Stewart Weaver's history of Himalayan mountaineering, *Fallen Giants* (Yale University Press). The fourth book, John Harlin III's *The Eiger Obsession* was reviewed in the 2007 *AJ*, 372-3, following the book's first publication in the USA. This latest UK edition is from Random House.

The judges for 2008 were Tim Noble, former editor of the *Climbers' Club Journal*, Alison Fell, poet and novelist, and Phil Bartlett, teacher and author of *The Undiscovered Country* (1993).

Delivering the judgment at a ceremony that has become one of the highlights of the Kendal Mountain Festival, Noble said that 'despite its title and front-cover hype' *Psychovertical* was a compulsive read. Kirkpatrick had managed 'a minor miracle'.

Noble continues: 'In measured and balanced writing, larded generously throughout with wit, self-deprecation and mordant humour that he keeps in fine check, he finds the perfect measure of himself on some of the planet's most dangerous climbs. It is perhaps because he knows himself so well that we accept both his expressed incompetence in climbing and writing (he is dyslexic) and efforts to overcome it without demur. Here is no case of classic British irony.

'We warmed to this author – to his urge to live life to the full; to understand his limitations as son, husband and father. The loss of a father figure in particular points to an underlying theme over 30 years of mountaineering biography; but none of us could recall a more sensitive and less self-indulgent treatment of the theme than here presented.

'The book is very cleverly structured (we all wonder if the Hutchinson editor gets credit here). The cuts from scene to scene and climb to climb work wonderfully well – a sort of mountaineering *Day of The Jackal* – as Kirkpatrick comes closer and closer to his nemesis on Reticent Wall. And it is this climb, the running narrative of the book, that grips the most. Fourteen pitches of aid climbing, unrelieved by conversation with a partner should by rights be boring. But it grips the heart further and further. These chapters are without exception exceptional – the best writing about aid

climbing we've read, and make for sweaty-palmed page turning. On this basis alone the book is a winner. Taken as whole it stands as a beacon for the next generation of young Turks: a challenge to pick up the pen and overcome their own reticence. Kirkpatrick has taken up the baton on behalf of Generation X and, at just the right moment, has said "Yes I can".'

Psychovertical
Andy Kirkpatrick
Hutchinson, 2008, pp 278, £18.99

What a rollercoaster of a book. Rarely has a climbing memoir been so 'in your face'. To attempt a calm, detached review seems unlikely and almost undesirable. But here goes, and I'll start with a diversion.

A few years ago I had the misfortune to appear on the same bill as Andy at the Fort William Mountain Film Festival. I was comprehensively upstaged and outgunned by an extraordinary barrage of surreal humour, outrageous tales of derring-do and the sheer exuberance of Andy's performances in front of an audience who loved every moment. I drove home reflecting that here was a new star in the ascendant – as well as resolving to add Andy to small children and animals, never to perform with.

So the appearance of *Psychovertical* was one that I looked forward to but wondered whether Andy could carry his 'stream of consciousness' lecturing style into sustaining the written word for a whole book, particularly as Andy's dyslexia is well known. He had, of course, written gear reviews in the magazines that were often quite hilarious, but a book … ?

Well, he has done it – and how! This is a comprehensive page-turner as Andy exorcises his demons in an epic solo ascent of Reticent Wall on El Capitan. The story pans from a broken home in Hull via many Alpine and Patagonian epics to the overhanging environment of El Capitan and two long and lonely weeks of self-imposed effort before topping out.

My only criticism of the book is that it follows the current trend of dividing the main Reticent Wall story into bite-sized chunks juxtaposed with the account of his life leading up to the climb. Both are absorbing and both can stand on their own. The endless switch-backing from chapter to chapter implies an admission that neither can stand on its own. It seems to be a disease caught from television, which assumes that nobody can concentrate on anything for more than five minutes. What's wrong with a beginning, middle and an end?

But despite this structural quibble, I read the book in one long, sweaty-palmed sitting. I can think of only three or four climbing books that sustain tension from beginning to end; *The Last Blue Mountain*, *Touching the Void* and *The Shining Mountain* come readily to mind; and *Psychovertical* is up there with them. Indeed, I can't think of any previous book that has put the fear of God into me while describing aid climbing. But this is no 'dangle and whack' tedium. It is the excruciating tension of long run-outs edging

on skyhooks barely gripping on finger-nail sized flakes, of placing tiny copperheads into expanding cracks, the shock of a huge fall with protection unzipping to be stopped by an ancient rusting nut before the long plunge into oblivion. I could go on – the storms, the hypothermia, the constant fight to stay in control – but I will refrain – read it for yourself.

A postscript: Andy has a real artistic talent and managed to get accepted on an Art Foundation Course in Hull, only to be rejected by a degree course at Sheffield. Having spent nearly 30 years teaching on foundation courses, Andy's rejection brought back painful memories of other talented students similarly treated. But reading Andy's story, it is gratifying to realise he has had the last laugh. For once the Boardman Tasker judges have got it right and Andy has won the biggest prize in mountain literature. Congratulations Andy – and I can't wait to see what comes next.

Jim Curran

Fallen Giants
A History of Himalayan Mountaineering from the Age of Empire to the Age of Extremes

Maurice Isserman and Stewart Weaver

Yale University Press, 2008, pp600, £25

Halfway through *Fallen Giants*, a determined assault on the imposing summit of a one-volume history of Himalayan mountaineering, two climbers face a similar conundrum. Charles Evans, high on Everest, decides against his partner Tom Bourdillon's suggestion of pushing on to the top, preferring to retreat from the South Summit. Hermann Buhl, meanwhile, at the other end of the Himalaya, watches his partner turn back down Nanga Parbat before pressing on alone towards the summit.

Despite being born in the same year, Evans and Buhl, authors Maurice Isserman and Stewart Weaver conclude, choose contrasting options because they are climbing in different eras. Buhl is heralding the determined individualism of the modern age, while Evans comes from a more patrician and courtly age, albeit one tainted with colonialism, where discretion and teamwork are placed ahead of a desperate gamble.

There's certainly some truth in this view. The British Everest expedition of 1953 was in many ways a continuation of the pre-war efforts. How much truth is another question. The answer depends on your outlook on the causes of history. The subtitle of *Fallen Giants* 'A History of Himalayan Mountaineering from the Age of Empire to the Age of Extremes' is a nod to the Marxist historian and cosmopolitan communist Eric Hobsbawm.

Isserman himself is a historian of radical movements in the United States; Stuart Weaver is a historian specialising in British colonial history at Rochester University. Both are enthusiastic hikers and climbers. Their stated aim in *Fallen Giants* is to locate the story of Himalayan climbing within a broader socio-political framework as a way of understanding

what motivated the men and, very occasionally, women who were at the forefront of Himalayan exploration. Were these extraordinary individuals simply that –extraordinary and individual – or agents of the cultures they emerged from.

'Though [George Mallory] famously disavowed any motive in climbing Mount Everest beyond the fact it was there,' the authors say in their Preface, 'the expeditions he joined in the 1920s followed the high colonial imperative of exploring, surveying, and ultimately subduing the Himalayan frontier. Throughout this book, these are the sorts of associations we have drawn in order to situate the arcane activity of Himalayan mountaineering fully in the context of its times.'

All historians, certainly since Marx and his ideas of historical materialism, have to wrestle with finding a balance between competing strands: the impact our cultures have on our actions and ideas, our material needs and the demands of our own personalities. Mountain climbing, inevitably, contains all these imperatives to a lesser or greater extent. Which of these you emphasise usually coincides with your own political standpoint. As the authors themselves explain:

'The expeditionary culture of the age of empire, perhaps best exemplified by the Everest expeditions of Mallory's day and some years thereafter, was a paradoxical thing. It was bound up with visions of imperial destiny that assumed the rule of white Europeans over darker-skinned Asians and drew many of its conventions from the hierarchical order of the English public school and the British Army. At the same time, it harboured individual climbers who were often misfits in their own societies, romantic rebels who found a spiritual purpose and freedom in the mountains…'

The other big idea the authors want to advance, and implicit in the title, is that Himalayan climbing follows the classic parabola of rise and fall. Expeditions, particularly a certain kind of American expedition, used to be full of fellowship and mutual support, whereas these days, in the age of extremes, Camelot has been overrun by barbarians more interested in making a few quid and getting their picture in the papers while destroying the mountain environment. 'Hypertrophied commercial individualism' is their phrase for this. (The book is far more readable than this phrase might suggest.)

Fair play. When trying to corral a subject as vast and sprawling as the history of Himalayan mountaineering, it's useful to have a big lasso and historical materialism provides one. And until the end of the book, when the authors' thesis and storytelling begins to go awry, it proves highly effective. The book is very much a romp across rugged terrain, the first of its scale since Kenneth Mason's *Abode of Snow* from the 1950s and in most ways far superior. Packed full of incident, flashes of humour and the succulent fruits of a great deal of reading, it really is indispensable to anyone with an interest in the history of mountaineering.

It opens with a tour de force, a magisterial geographical overview of this prodigious region. From there we spin through the first faltering steps of Himalayan exploration and the curious interface between Empire and

sport. Familiar stories and faces loom out from the haze of memory refreshed and successfully reinterpreted. There are, for example, pithy and good-humoured takes on figures like Martin Conway and Douglas Freshfield, although they're too hard on A F Mummery, whose instincts were correct, just hopelessly anachronistic.

I found the sustained assault on institutions, particularly English ones, a little flat-footed. Like Hollywood movies, where an English actor is cast as the villain, the authors don't much care for the English establishment. Fair enough. Kick the Alpine Club, by all means; I'm a big fan of that myself. But Isserman and Weaver are sometimes not astute enough in their cultural judgements. The Alpine Club has never been a subversive organisation, but study the intellectual positions of its most famous Victorian members and it starts to look much less like just another extension of the establishment.

A more powerful line of enquiry would be to examine in closer detail the background of the Everest men of the 1920s. Mallory, of course, is there in spades, and is admired for his links to left-wing intellectuals. Likewise Charles Bruce, presented as the quintessential imperial cartoon. But there is nothing about the missionary work of Howard Somervell, who offers fresh ground for their kind of approach. The Quaker and educationalist Robin Hodgkin is mentioned only as someone lucky enough to run into Charles Houston, but the Masherbrum expedition of 1938 would have offered a useful frame for a fresher, deeper and more informed discussion of British mountaineering before the war.

Ditto, writing about Chris Bonington, the authors note approvingly that his mother was a member of the Communist Party and that growing up in a single-parent family somehow put him in the same social bracket as the proletarian heroes Don Whillans or Joe Brown. Yikes! Don't tell Sandhurst. It's true that Bonington is a far more complex figure in British climbing history than many of his own contemporaries allowed, but not because he was a working-class hero. Anyway, joining the communists in the 1930s was almost *de rigueur* for a portion of the English elite. Just ask Anthony Blunt.

Where the authors' take on English colonialism really tripped them up, however, was in their treatment of the aftermath of the 1953 Everest expedition. It's well known that relations between Tenzing and Sir John Hunt were strained in Kathmandu, as political concerns hijacked the celebrations for the conquest of Everest. The Foreign Office was borderline racist in its treatment of the Tibetan-born Sherpa, but that charge cannot possibly extend to the British climbers.

It is true that Hunt could have been more emollient towards a proud but essentially decent man. But the authors go much further, suggesting that while the British contingent toured the world making money for the Himalayan Committee, Tenzing was hard at work setting up institutions to benefit his people.

In fact, the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute in Darjeeling was a way for Nehru to make political capital from Everest, cementing relations

with independent-spirited hill people who were ethnically Nepali on the mountainous fringes of India while leaving real control of in the hands of the Indian Army and Delhi. All of which sounds rather colonial, don't you think?

Ultimately, however, my main concern is that *Fallen Giants* doesn't always get to grips with the most important context of all – the climbing. True, all the people who make an appearance in this book were the product of a particular time and place, but they were also riveted by the idea of climbing mountains. How you do that, what constitutes a challenge, what is perceived as an advance, all build into a culture of their own and have to be understood properly or the project abandoned. Hermann Buhl had a vision; he imagined new possibilities. Some of his inspiration came from his nature, some from his background, but much of it came from within mountaineering itself.

Isserman and Weaver largely get to grips with the driving forces in the Himalaya up until the 1950s, which they regard as a golden age, but their interpretation begins to wobble soon after. They're not totally fixated by 8000m peaks, but they do tend to see everything through that prism. Reinhold Messner provides a useful continuing strand in the Hobsbawm theory of mountaineering history, the arch-individualist making good. Likewise the commercialism that followed Messner is covered. There's an entertaining glance at feminism in mountaineering, with the male huffing that followed the 1978 Annapurna women's expedition.

But it's all a little simplistic. The last four decades are skipped over in just 50 pages and quite a lot of that is spent on disasters afflicting commercial expeditions. Guys, trust me, a lot more went on. True, after first national ascents, most countries lost interest in mountaineering as national aggrandisement, to be replaced on Everest by self-interested consumerism. That's an important trope. But there are other strands to examine. Eastern European mountaineering, particularly by the Poles and Slovenians, offers rich material, both in pure mountaineering terms and in the social context the authors enjoy.

They mention Jerzy Kukuczka, but fail to record his incredible achievement of climbing all the 8000m peaks bar one either by a new route or a first winter ascent. Ascents that more or less define modern mountaineering, like the west face of Gasherbrum IV, Great Trango or the Golden Pillar of Spantik simply don't appear. The names Voytek Kurtyka, Mick Fowler, and Jenez Jeglic aren't there. There's a lot more about Bill House than Steve House. They could have had a field day with the impact Reagan and Thatcher had on climbing, but the project seems to have run out of steam.

I think that for all their materialist historical credentials, there's a dreamy streak in both the authors. The history of Himalayan climbing no longer holds much appeal for Isserman and Weaver after the golden age. The romance has gone out of it for them. Their expedition ideal is very much the American ventures led by Charles Houston before and after the

war, a man with direct links to the Kennedy administration, whose world-view perhaps matches their own. For a couple hell-bent on exposing historical materialism and the imperial narrative in mountaineering, that's rather touching. But it does leave them more in the camp of James Ramsay Ullman than Eric Hobsbawm.

An example. The book finishes with a reflection from Houston after he returned with Bill Tilman from the first Western exploration of Khumbu, a world he regarded as 'a beautiful oasis in a troubled world'. It was hard, Houston says, to leave 'this happy primitive land'. That's a sentiment straight out of Rousseau. But Khumbu was no oasis. It had its own history, one that included suffering, hardship, and exile as well as beauty, a world capable of all the prejudice and intolerance of our own, masked by those friendly faces.

Ed Douglas

Cham

Jonathan Trigell

Serpent's Tail, 2007, paperback edition 2008, pp224, £7.99

I read this book from two points of view, the objective and the subjective. If literature has rights, the most basic arise from the words that appear over the doors of the Victoria and Albert Museum, 'The excellence of every art must consist in the complete accomplishment of its purpose'[1]. Determine the purpose, and read accordingly. This is the objective view.

This little book is intended to be a light read, the sort you pick up on the way to Chamonix if your flight is delayed. It is an amusement, a diversion. And if it irritates you it is to be tossed aside lightly, not thrown with great force[2].

The dust jacket tells us, 'the writing soars when describing the sublime mountain scenery...' Well, maybe, but given the purpose of this book it would be unfair to search for and fail to find those passages of soaring literature here. Yes, there are descriptions, one or two, which trigger the imagination, the magic road to Chamonix 'raised on great soaring stone pillars…looted from the temple of the Titans', and a clever reference to the dog shit that emerges in spring from the winter ice. But these are few and far between.

More often the descriptions are slightly inaccurate; he refers to the 'Glacier de Pendant' when descending what, to all English speakers (his main readers), is the 'Front Face' and if he is going to be French about it, he might as well get it right; Glacier de la Pendant. In English we say Mountain Guides, not High Mountain Guides. Sometimes he is just plain wrong; pisteurs do not help out on rescues in Col du Plan. There are several other examples in this vein which all have the effect of halting the storytell-

1 Joshua Reynolds, 1870
2 With apologies to Dorothy Parker, 1957.

ing while the book is (unfairly I admit) hurled across the room.

If airport reading is meant to be plot driven, and I think it is, this book is weak in that area too. There are two plots here; the main plot, a psychological one, centres on Itchy's deplorable sex life and is described with near-pornographic repetition. (pages 9, 24, 27, 33, 60, 82, 70, 76, 81, 87, 133, 149, 178, 243, and 251). All this stuff is apparently driven by low self-esteem and even lower esteem for the women he uses, until he is rescued from himself by 'The Nightingale', a pretty young French women, with almost no character description to call her own. A psychological novel needs strong character descriptions to drive it, and so does this book.

The subplot, promising at first to be a thriller, appears to be based on the true story of the rapist caught in Chamonix in 2001. The book opens with the rape scene, informing the reader that the rapist and his detection will be the main plot line. But that information is wrong. Other than providing prurient word sketches of the rapes there is no point to this sub plot which terminates with the culprit being accidentally caught by Wendy (a transvestite who clearly owes her literary existence to Roberta, John Irving's magnificent creation in *World According to Garp*.)

In summary, does Cham work as a light read? Is it a page-turner? Yes, but only just. I freely admit, it is a better novel than I could produce, but even so, the scenery is scarce, the characters are thin and the plot weak. This is my objective assessment of the work. Now for the subjective: Do I like it? No, not really.

Victor Saunders

First Ascent
Stephen Venables
Cassell Illustrated, 2008, pp192, £25

In *First Ascent*, Stephen Venables has produced a grand chronology of the most famous moments in mountaineering history and the climbers who created them. It is a broad canvas which he describes as 'the whole game of mountaineering from the smallest boulder to the summit of Everest', introducing those iconic climbers who opened the door for others to follow. Not always immediately. The first recorded alpine ascent in 1492, when a French army captain attacked Mont Aiguille in the Vercors on the orders of the King, using ladders and prototype pitons, was not repeated for 342 years.

The 150-year-old story of popular mountaineering that unfolded via the great Alpine summits and their dramatic history to the Himalaya and beyond, led to the renaissance created by a new school of climbers seeking the steeper, harder, faster challenges that set new physical, intellectual and emotional limits. Venables presents this history in crisp and engaging style paying homage to past generations of mountaineers and respect to a new generation achieving first ascents that are inevitably harder to find and more challenging to achieve.

The book is large format and is handsomely illustrated; some well-known historical images, portraits and engravings with some spectacular double-page colour spreads.

First Ascent is the story of men and mountains told by a mountaineer with a formidable personal record as the first Briton to climb Everest without oxygen, pioneering a new route on the Kangshung Face. This has modest mention but Venables' knowledge of the sport and understanding of his fellow mountaineers make his account a significant addition to the mountaineering record.

Ronald Faux

Paths of Glory

Jeffrey Archer

Macmillan, 2009, pp 404, £18.99

It is symptomatic that after all the years of research that Archer claims to have done, that he believes Everest to be a granite mountain, and that the Royal Geographical Society is the ultimate arbiter on the question of whether or not it is possible to climb a mountain. This is a singular achievement. But as Archer explained to me himself, he is a storyteller and does not feel himself bound or unduly hampered by the constraints of the facts – the detail of history. Archer is a believer in the old adage, 'don't let the facts spoil a good story'. As such he could have warded off serious criticism and censure, had he included an honest admission to that effect, informing the reader that he has freely rewritten history to suit his own ends. But Archer has chosen to present this 'historical novel', as being essentially 'true' if not correct. It is a fascinating and revealing distinction, true but not correct – i.e. not corresponding to the historical facts – that then begs the question, *true to what*? To the spirit of George Mallory as Archer subjectively divines it, irrespective of all those tiresome facts to the contrary? We are in an entirely subjective world here where Archer, ideally, would have no objective criteria to validate any truth claims or consequently, to enable us even to distinguish truth from falsehood, fact from fiction. But outside the pinchbeck fantasy world of Jeffrey Archer's make-believe, the historical facts, like the testimony of the rocks, remain.

Reading the novel it quickly becomes clear that Archer is a man who manifestly has no love of the hills and therefore, has no interest in or understanding of climbing. This inevitably disables and vitiates his book at the outset from being a credible account. But Archer is seemingly sublimely unaware that this might even be a problem. He has simply proceeded to superimpose a template that he can understand and relate to onto the subject, which is one of competition, keen rivalry, and the overwhelming (overweening?) desire and drive to be the first. It is a territory where he feels completely at home. And to be the first man on top of the highest mountain in the world, that really does capture Archer's imagination. Thus the *Archerized* version of events boils down to it being the story, or rather

the melodrama, of Archer's fictional Mallory, 'who loved two women and one of them killed him'; the pair, of course, being Ruth Turner, his Guinevere, and Everest, his Jezebel. To this 'heady tug-of-love' Archer adds a sub-plot about the fierce rivalry between George Mallory and George Ingle Finch. Condemned as the two climbers are to having to provide some drama in the hope of sustaining the reader's interest, they must compete against each other to be the first to reach the ultimate summit and achieve undying fame.

Faced with a novel that is such a travesty of the historical facts and which presents such a 'collideoscape' of anachronisms, inconsistencies, absurdities and schoolboy howlers, it is hard to know where to begin. But it is singularly apparent that Archer has decided not to consult maps and even more bizarrely, not to work from photographs. Hence, when it comes to describing Everest and Archer's prose soars – as soar it must – to meet the challenge, he describes the summit as follows: 'Her noble head rested on a slim neck, nestling in shoulders of massive granite.' A few lines further on, he has Mallory doubt if he is, 'capable of climbing onto even the shoulders of this giant, let alone scaling her granite ice face'. Later we are assured that, 'Those members of the RGS who had predicted that Chomolungma would be like Mont Blanc, but a little higher, were already looking foolish.'

Curiously, Archer makes an incomprehensibly confused and confusing muddle of Mallory's politics. On first meeting Rupert Brooke at the Fabian stand, during Freshers Fair, Archer has Mallory say, 'I have long believed in the doctrines of Quintus Fabius Maximus.' Later on, when he is a teacher at Charterhouse, he will have Mallory complain of a friend and colleague that, 'he showed no interest in climbing, and even less in the beliefs of Quintus Fabius Maximus.' But Quintus Fabius Maximus Verrucosus (he had a wart on his lip) was an elected Roman dictator not an intellectual socialist with a passionate belief in social democracy. It was for his successful military tactics of attrition against a superior enemy, Hannibal, that the Fabian Society named themselves after him, not for his political beliefs.

In an unguarded and strikingly revealing moment, that discloses an extraordinary lack of self-awareness, Archer has Mallory, whilst still a history teacher, complain aloud to a colleague: 'Marking the lower fifth's essays on the Armada', said George, 'I do believe that lot find a sadistic pleasure in rewriting history.' Which inevitably leaves one wondering about the nature of the pleasure that Archer himself gets out of the rewriting of history. It is the question that hangs over almost every page of this novel.

Later on, in a letter home to Ruth from the Front, Archer has Mallory write, 'Do you remember Siegfried Herford? What a difficult decision he had to make, having a German father and an English mother.' But of course Herford's father, as anyone with an ear for that patronymic would know, was English; it was his mother who was German. And it was Siegfried's mother also, who made that difficult decision for him. As Herford's biographer Keith Treacher movingly relates: 'It is your country,' she told him

laconically, 'and you must fight for it.' Archer's muddled version is typical of his general sloppy inattentiveness and his lack of historical knowledge. The result is always the thoughtless, clumsy mistake – Herford a German patronym – and the subsequent, inevitable trivialisation of the real, historical facts.

This is Archer's first attempt at an historical novel, so how does he fare in describing the historic, 1924 summit assault – one of mountaineering's most legendary and fiercely debated climbs?

After adjusting their mouthpieces (the oxygen supply Archer describes owes more to the 'Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau' than to the Irvine MK. V prototype) the ill-fated pair set out on the climb. Soon they face, 'a vertical rock, covered with ice that never melted from one year to the next'. They climb this we are told, for forty minutes. But, 'Once Irvine had climbed up to join him, George checked the altimeter: 112 ft left to climb.' The altimeter here is seemingly an oracular device, as the exact height of Everest was at that time unknown and also, Archer's Mallory does not seem to have done any mental arithmetic either to make even a remotely credible stab at such an observation. Archer subsequently goes on, 'He looked up, this time to be faced with a sheet of ice that had been built up over the years into a cornice overhanging the East face, which would have prevented a four-legged animal with spiked hooves from progressing any further.'

You would have thought that faced with this obstacle, the years of research that Archer claims to have done could have paid off handsomely. We surely should have had here a memorable description of Mallory's legendary, superb step cutting skills. Not a bit of it. Jeffrey doesn't really 'get ice-axes' – anyone for a spot of glacial moraine croquet? – so Mallory simply raises his boot to meet the challenge. But no sooner does he venture forth his intrepid boot than the mountain is struck by lightning down below. Cue the thunder. The thunder duly claps. This is the very stuff of high drama, and Archer relentlessly carries on the cliffhanger suspense in consummate, office memo prose. Mallory 'assumed he would be engulfed by a storm, but as he looked down, he realized that they were far above the tempest venting its fury on his colleagues some 2,000ft below.'

Throughout Archer's Mallory is almost invariably addressed, by other members of the expedition, deferentially as 'skipper'. So, rather like the quondam chairman of the Tory Party himself, he doesn't have companions, he has colleagues.

But what about the obstacle of that sheet of ice, the ice-axe surely might be useful but, 'Once again, George lifted his boot and tried to gain some purchase on the ice. The surface immediately cracked and his heel skidded back down the slope. He almost laughed. Could things get any worse?'

Sure enough they do. 'After a dozen such steps the narrow ridge became thinner until he had to fall on all fours and begin crawling. He didn't look to his left or right, because he knew that on both sides of him was a sheer drop of several hundred feet.' Several hundred feet! I hear you cry in dis-

belief. So you will understand why it is just as well that Archer's Mallory doesn't look down to his left or right, otherwise he too would be alarmed – aghast to discover that approximately 10,700 feet had somehow mysteriously disappeared from the Kangshung Face; a disquieting anomaly for even the most seasoned mountaineer. Those of you who have been high or higher, will no doubt be starting to recognize some of the hitherto completely baffling topographical features of the mountain that Archer's Mallory has been climbing, and will now have the sneaking suspicion that we are not in the Death Zone at all, but in a confused and confusing fantasy zone – the dreadful old tosh zone in fact – and that this can be none other than the treacherous, false summit of the legendary Rum Tarradiddle. That benighted peak in the heart of Rajwearistans Morcrassian Range, that lies forever in the mighty shadow of the sublime Rum Doodle.

But what of Archer's Mallory, the 'skipper' on his hands and knees in that terrifying situation still, with those frightful, vertiginous drops of 'several hundred feet' on either side. Have no fear! The 'skipper' has to boost his flagging morale in this desperate situation, the most wise and heartening counsel. It is a maxim no climber would wish to be without, 'Look up, ignore everything around you and battle on.'

Archer's Mallory usually thinks in these painfully risible, jolly hockey sticks clichés. For a man whom Archer has translating Homer's Illiad and reading Joyce's Ulysses, Archer's 'skipper' sadly, seems to owe his all to Angela Brazil with just a pinch of Bulldog Drummond.

But I like to think that, in the terrible bathos of this situation, Mallory, so ignominiously reduced to shuffling along on all fours, and in such 'extreme peril', would have thought of happier days, and recalled to mind a snatch of that droll verse, written in a 'shanty' bath at Pen y Pass, after a memorable day on Lliwedd, by his friend and climbing mentor Geoffrey Winthrop Young:

Ye Mallorys of England that still guard
our native screes! . . . My Kingdom for a horse
or, better still, a mule . . .

Sadly though, Archer's 'skipper' must 'battle on'; this is a serious business. 'Another yard forward, another half yard back.' No laughing matter. Somehow the 'skipper' seems to have puzzlingly slid back on to that 'sheet of ice', to be sliding back and forth so, but Archer does not trouble to make it clear as to why the 'skipper' should be sliding back down the ridge, even though he has taken to proceeding in this most resolute and determined manner, shuffling along 'on all fours'. But any thought of using his ice-axe here has deserted him. (You could be forgiven for thinking that this might be due to the debilitating effects of altitude, but as this is Rum Tarradiddle remember, any thought of the tiresome problems of altitude has been expediently forgotten). The 'skipper' resolutely sticks to his hands and knees throughout and progresses painfully slowly along the 'narrow ridge', 'a yard forward, another half yard back', doing what one can only suppose is the Chomolungma Shuffle. At the height of this torment Archer's 'skipper'

not unreasonably asks, 'Just how much can the body endure?' One might also wonder just how much can the reader endure.

Mercifully though, this being Rum Tarradiddle, the 'skipper' does not encounter or have to contend with the high altitude wind – 'the biting wind' as Archer, always ready with the tired cliché calls it – until he has climbed up on to the summit itself – just a tantalizing sixty odd feet away. Down here, at a mere 28,970ft approximately, the wind, doubtless having a touchingly soft spot for the high endeavours of Oxbridge alumni, does not even make its inclement, never mind rude appearance. But such, of course, are the absurdly comic anomalies on Rum Tarradiddle. Likewise, the cold is seemingly not a serious problem on halcyon Rum Tarradiddle, hence the redundancy of gloves, irrespective of other features that might suggest the need – i.e. the presence of snow and ice. It perhaps says something that not even Archer can dispense with snow and ice. Old Jeffrey knows a thing or two about mountains.

It is another twenty minutes, we are told, before 'George Leigh Mallory' (a truly momentous occasion such as this requires all the gravitas that a full moniker can give a chap) 'puts his hand, his right hand, on the summit of Everest. He pulled himself slowly up on top and lay flat on his stomach. ' "Hardly a moment of triumph", was his first thought.'

'Hardly a moment of triumph' doesn't really begin to fathom the full bathos of this hilariously absurd account of the 'achievement' of the summit. But there can be no doubts left now about this being the first account of an ascent of Rum Tarradiddle.

Before starting the descent from the top of the highest mountain in the world, in a final bathetic travesty, Archer's 'skipper' – more yellow stockings and cross garters than Kashmir puttees – an Aldermanic or Rotarian Malvolio making his obsequious obeisance – pays this absurdly pompous, British Empire fustian salutation to the mountain: '"The King of England sends his compliments, ma'am," he said, giving a bow, "and hopes that you will grant his humble subjects safe passage back to their homeland."'

After that, I feel that the only adequate response to the above would be the blowing, by Chomolungma, of a seismically felt tectonic raspberry! Lawksamercy, ma'am: what a *true* load of old cobblers.

Charles Lind

Maurice Wilson: A Yorkshireman on Everest
Ruth Hanson (foreword by Doug Scott)
Hayloft, 2008, pp200, £12.50 (profits to Community Action Nepal)

It was not the mark on history Maurice Wilson had hoped to make. The war hero from Bradford set out in May 1933 determined to become the first man to climb Everest by landing a light aircraft on its lower slopes and striding to the summit powered by sheer physical toughness and a spiritual will to succeed. That he had never flown in an aircraft or had the least

idea of how to climb serious mountains were secondary to an obsessional determination to succeed. The result was inevitable. He died and his bones occasionally reappear as the East Rongbuk glacier, in which he was buried, grinds its way down the flank of Everest.

The most extraordinary fact about Wilson's one-man expedition is that he managed, against what should have been insuperable odds, to get within striking distance of the North Col, which allows Ruth Hanson an admiring view of what he achieved. Her biography of Wilson, who was dubbed 'the mad Yorkshireman', is a thorough sifting of the evidence from the diaries he left and from the man's difficult history.

It was the disappearance of Mallory and Irvine on Everest in 1924 that first fired Wilson's imagination but other powerful influences helped shape his stubborn, bull-headed nature. He fought in the trenches during the First World War and was awarded the Military Cross for conspicuous gallantry under heavy shell and machinegun fire. He was wounded and never fully recovered from his injuries or his experience of the carnage of the Great War. After two failed marriages he devoted himself to a regime of fasting, faith in God and a determination to demonstrate to the world the power of his belief by conquering Everest, a quixotic tilt at the world's most formidable windmill.

The story has been well recorded. Wilson bought a Gypsy Moth biplane, which he named Ever Wrest, and then learned how to fly it. He was not a naturally gifted pilot but against the best efforts of the government to stop him, less than a month and 5,000 miles later his aircraft spluttered on the last of its fuel into India. Hanson recounts the frustrations and refusals placed in Wilson's way by the authorities that drove him to subterfuge. Wilson described in his diary how disguised as a Tibetan Buddhist monk he 'crept out of Darjeeling on bended knees to camouflage height'. With him were three Sherpas who had worked for the Ruttledge expedition the previous year. Although Wilson's training for Everest had been to walk from Bradford to London they covered the 300 undulating miles through Sikkim and Tibet to the Rongbuk monastery in 25 days. He then confronted the thin air and technical challenge of the climb to the North Col, fully expecting that the steps and fixed ropes of the previous year's expedition would be there for him to use. They were not. Wilson had no crampons and was taught by a Sherpa how to use an ice-axe as he twice attempted to reach the North Col.

Hanson rejects the idea that this was an elaborate suicide. She puts Wilson's lack of preparation down to naïve optimism rather than reckless stupidity or a wish to die making a name for himself. His story became almost stranger than fiction, reappearing as Wilson the Wonder Athlete in the *Wizard* comic, as the tormented character in Barry Collins' one-man play *The Ice Chimney* and as the central figure in Mike Harding's book *Yorkshire Transvestite Found Dead on Everest*. This followed rumours of a high-heeled shoe and items of women's underwear found at one of the old English camps but there was no positive evidence to suggest they belonged to

Maurice Wilson or that he was a cross-dresser. He even made 'guest appearances' in Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* when Rushdie's character Alleluia Cone comes across Wilson during her own Everest bid. From the non-fictional world came the unlikely suggestion that Wilson may have climbed considerably higher than the North Col, based on evidence of a pre-second world war tent found high on the mountain. This has been rejected as improbable. A Union Jack Wilson intended for the summit was still in his rucksack where his body was found.

Hanson acknowledges it will never be known exactly how far up Everest Maurice Wilson reached before exhaustion, cold and exposure finally took their toll. That is not the key part of the story. He was naïve, inadequately prepared and did not sensibly retreat when he could have done but he deserves respect for his conviction in what he was doing, admiration for his strength and commitment and applause for getting as far as he did. Hanson concludes: 'The sensible way is not always, for everyone, the true way. Having given all he could to make his crazy dream reality; to me at least he becomes a hero.' It would be another 19 years before Everest was climbed and a further 46 years before Reinhold Messner reached the summit alone in the style of Maurice Wilson.

Ronald Faux

The Struggle for Everest

George Ingle Finch, edited by George W Rodway

Carreg, 2008, pp 232, £20

How odd that this significant record of early British attempts to scale Everest should be first published in Germany as *Der Kampf um den Everest*, and that it has taken 84 years for a full translation into English. *The Struggle for Everest* by George Ingle Finch gives a fascinating view of the problems and politics of those early expeditions and the important role Finch played both in developing ways to deliver supplementary oxygen to climbers at high altitudes and persuading the establishment of the benefits. Politics, prejudice and personal dislikes seem largely to blame for the delay.

Finch's original text has been edited by George W Rodway, an assistant professor at the University of Utah and an honorary research fellow in the Centre for Altitude, Space and Extreme Environment at University College, London; a specialist who clearly recognises Finch's contribution to these first attempts on Everest, despite persistent rejection by the Everest Committee.

Finch was born in New South Wales, Australia, and aged 14 moved with his family to Europe. Educated in Switzerland, his interest in mountaineering began almost immediately. He studied chemistry at the *Eidgenossische Technische Hochschule* in Zurich before a distinguished professional scientific career that led to a long association with Imperial College of Science and Technology in London. By 1921 when the reconnaissance expedition was chosen, Finch was already established as a highly able mountaineer and an

ideal candidate for the team. His record of alpine routes climbed without a guide was impressive and his performance in the pressure chamber, where high altitude could be simulated, demonstrated extraordinary fitness. Even so, Finch was rejected as physically unfit.

Despite his climbing record, Finch found himself at odds with some members of the selection committee on a number of counts. He was not of the Oxbridge elite who commanded the sport at the time; his enthusiasm for combating altitude with supplementary oxygen was regarded by some as unsportsmanlike and thoroughly un-British. A similar rationale denied parachutes to pilots in the Royal Flying Corps.

Even so Finch was selected for the 1922 expedition when a late order of 10 oxygen sets was obtained from the Ministry of Aviation, the type being used by pilots in the final stages of the Great War. Finch reflected that science had handed mountaineers a weapon for combating high altitude, one that became known among the porters as English air. The doubters still persisted, one 'expert' insisting it was equally important to determine just how high a human could climb without oxygen as to create artificial conditions 'which have nothing whatsoever to do with honest mountain climbing'.

The men actually on the mountain were more impressed by Finch's experiments comparing the performance of climbers with and without an oxygen supplement. He also demonstrated the benefits of breathing oxygen during rest periods, which he found sharpened the appetite, and of using down as protection in jackets as well as sleeping bags. Some of his other views however do not survive modern scrutiny. He advocated the invigorating and well-known stimulating effects of nicotine as it affected the respiratory process in a pleasant way. There was an exhausting need to concentrate on breathing at all times, but after the first few inhalations of cigarette smoke, mountaineers discovered that their breathing changed to the involuntary, automatic kind, the effect of a single cigarette lasting for up to three hours.

Finch also held some curious ideas about how human skin might be hosed with oxygen to encourage absorption, and his view that climbers with long legs and short trunks had an advantage over climbers with short legs and long trunks would surely be disputed by men in the Whillans mould.

When Finch made his assault on Everest with Captain Geoffrey Bruce, a cousin of the expedition leader General C G Bruce, and Corporal Tejbir of the Gurkhas, he expressed absolute determination to make it to the top. 'Nothing, absolutely nothing could cast a doubt upon this conviction. It could even mean defeat if a single man were to be doubtful, experience internal surrender, or falter in any way.' he writes. In the event, Finch and Bruce reached 8326m on the final ridge, a record at the time and only 208m short of the point reached the following year by Norton and Somervell. Bruce, a far less experienced mountaineer, was close to collapse when the pair turned back.

It was never clear as to why Finch chose to have *The Struggle for Everest* published in German but his book *The Making of a Mountaineer*, published in 1924, proved an inspiration to a generation of climbers. His writing style is frank and unadorned and this edition has many diary extracts and photographs of the pioneers with their baggy tweeds, clinkered boots and stoic ambition.

Finch was not invited on the 1924 expedition. Perhaps old reservations surfaced, and there was a spat with the Everest Committee over earnings from lectures following the 1922 attempt. Reflecting on the failure in 1924 and the loss of Mallory and Irvine, Finch points out that the climbers were two to three hours late in reaching the spot where they were last seen, which could only mean an earlier failure in the oxygen equipment. Irvine was known to be carrying a flag that would have been easily visible flying from the summit.

In a postscript to the book, Stephen Venables raises an intriguing question. How might history have been re-written if on that final attempt Mallory, the impractical romantic but determined mountaineer, had been partnered on that final summit attempt by Finch, one of the best mountaineers of his day and able to contribute his methodical, scientific professionalism to the Everest problem?

Ronald Faux

Dark Summit

Nick Heil

Virgin Books, 2008, pp 271, £18.99

Everest, another catastrophe, another book. Nick Heil, an American journalist and specialist in climbing at dangerous heights, describes the extraordinary coincidence of events on the north side of the mountain in 2006 when 40 mountaineers, on their way to the summit, climbed past one man who lay dying, when another left for dead revived and managed to clamber back to safety as 10 others perished in relatively fair weather in the so-called death zone.

The incidents caused an international sensation and presented the mountaineering community with some solemn questions. Sir Edmund Hillary issued his own scathing indictment that a man was left by fellow mountaineers to die. Though *Dark Summit* opens with the parable of the Good Samaritan, Heil remains non-judgmental, leaving readers to form their own opinion on the wealth of evidence he has gathered.

There is much in mitigation for the mountaineers. The world below Everest is radically changed from the time Hillary and Tensing strode its summit. The highest point on earth, poking its beckoning finger into the fringes of outer space, has become an iconic goal for increasing hundreds of individuals prepared to pay US$20,000 for a place on a guided expedition to the summit. As Heil points out, Everest is now big business, its base camp a crowded multilingual community firmly connected to the outside

world by satellite phone, laptop, i-pod, dvd, meteo and medical service with constant scrutiny by internet channels ready with instant analysis of every action and decision made on the mountain. It is an age apart from time of the pioneers.

Hillary had proved Everest was possible, Messner and Habler demonstrated it could be climbed without supplementary oxygen, the north side was reopened and the highest point on earth came within ordinary ambitious reach. Heil reflects that, far from reducing numbers, the 1996 Everest disaster, in which nine climbers perished, inspired even greater demand after it was described in Jon Krakauer's book *Into Thin Air*.

More commercial outfits offered to guide climbers to the summit and the numbers mushroomed. Among those inspired was David Sharp, a 34-year-old engineer from Guisborough, who had already twice attempted Everest. Climbing independently with no Sherpas, guide or radio, carrying minimal oxygen equipment and unsupported by any of the commercial outfits, Sharp was a loner who 'wanted to get Everest out of his system'. On his third attempt he was last seen climbing slowly, alone and late in the day towards the summit. Whether he succeeded will never be known. The next day he was found below the first step on the summit ridge in a cave that already held the corpse of an Indian climber, known as Green Boots, who had perished some 10 years earlier.

Heil describes how the first climbers to reach the cave as they headed up the mountain were dumbfounded to discover a second, unknown, figure inside. They yelled at him 'Hey! Let's go! Get moving!' – but without response. He lay, eyes closed, hugging his knees to his chest. He wore no oxygen mask but tufts of breath escaped from blue lips. He was comatose, unable to move. Other climbers passed the cave without realising there were two bodies in there and it was later in the morning that two more Sherpas found Sharp, pulled him from the cave and gave him oxygen to no effect.

They could do no more. A later attempt to revive Sharp by another Sherpa who fed him oxygen succeeded with the climber mumbling a few barely audible words. 'Just want to sleep,' he said. Three other climbers, one an amputee whose stump sockets were blistered and bleeding from the friction of his prosthetic limbs, could do nothing to help, faced with the impossibility of evacuating an unconscious, immobile body from a point so high on the mountain. As one climber recalled: 'It is one thing to pass by someone long dead, the corpse welded to the landscape; it is a different experience to pass by a man still dying.'

Heil vividly describes the chaotic scramble of exhausted climbers along the summit ridge blundering their way through the narrow weather window that allowed access to the summit. Lincoln Hall, a seasoned Australian climber and client with one of the five commercial operations, set out on the final ridge with determined focus accompanied by three Sherpas. In darkness they climbed strongly, passing the cave oblivious to the bodies inside and reaching the top at 7am, that day's first arrivals. But the descent

became a debacle, one climber collapsing and dying and Hall becoming delirious and eventually collapsing 28,200ft high on the mountain with darkness approaching. The Sherpas fought for nine hours lowering him down the ridge. They shouted at him, shook him, fed him oxygen, prised open his eyelids and poked his eyeballs with their fingers but Hall remained completely unresponsive. They believed him dead.

How he was found at daybreak, by four climbers bound for the summit, is brilliantly described. They discovered him sitting cross-legged about two feet from the 10,000ft drop of the Kangshung Face apparently changing his shirt. Hall wore no hat, gloves or sunglasses and had no oxygen mask, sleeping bag, mattress or food. 'I imagine you're surprised to see me here,' he said. Incredibly, he had survived to be led safely down the mountain. One dead man had lived as one live man had been left to die, opening a wider moral debate.

Dark Summit is an excellent analysis of the present state of Everest as an industry, as a right of passage challenge where Russell Brice, dynamic head of Himex, the major commercial outfit, uses his telescope, radio and detailed knowledge of the mountain to operate traffic control on the summit ridge, monitoring his clients and organising his Sherpas as they struggle at an altitude where the human body begins to self-destruct.

After a year spent talking to those who had climbed or tried to climb Everest, Heil felt no closer to understanding why people were so willing to risk their lives doing it. He concluded that rather than being a transformational power, the summit of Everest appeared to give only a weathered fatigue, a yearning to return to families, a warm bath and a soft bed. Maybe that was it, he reflects, reaching a point so close to our own extinction that made every mundane detail of our lives numinous again.

Ronald Faux

Forget Me Not: a Memoir

Jennifer Lowe-Anker

The Mountaineers Books, 2008, pp256, US$24.95

It is impossible to avoid being drawn in by the mesmerizing jacket cover of *Forget Me Not*, Jennifer Lowe-Anker's biography of her late husband, Alex Lowe. An almost mystical panorama of the Tetons is silhouetted against a stormy Wyoming sky, with forget-me-not flowers superimposed on the deepening shades of blue. Jennifer's own painting, it was her response to Alex's written request from Trango Tower in 1999: 'Everywhere I look, the little Alpine forget-me-nots are blooming… I know how much you love those delicate little flowers and I have pressed some and keep them with me… Do you think you could come up with an idea for a painting that ties together these flowers and our love for each other?'

His request – and her painting – set the tone for this long-awaited story of one of the most talented and respected American alpinists, Alex Lowe.

While still in the prime of his life, Alex was killed in an avalanche on Shishapangma in 1999. Jennifer was determined that she should be the one to tell Alex's life story and for years the climbing community waited patiently. While talking with Jennifer about her efforts to write this book, she confided that she just couldn't seem to get at it. Not too surprising, considering the emotional upheaval she had endured, as well as the increased responsibility of raising three active sons whilst continuing her painting career and starting a charitable foundation in Alex's name. She expressed the need to escape her daily responsibilities, if only for a few weeks, to concentrate on the book. She finally did, enrolling in the Banff Mountain Writing Program in 2006 for a month of uninterrupted focus.

She later described the feeling of arriving – alone – with her computer, her letters from Alex, her notes and a few personal things. She moved in to her simple apartment/writing studio, spread everything out to her liking, and prepared herself for that most difficult task: facing her memories of a life with Alex.

The result, published 10 years after his death, is not a traditional biography of an exceptional climber. It is rather a love story that encompasses two extended families, a man and a woman, deep friendships and even deeper loss. Rather than one main character there are two: Alex and Jennifer. The story begins, not with their meeting but much earlier, with their respective childhoods, growing up in the state that they both loved so much, Montana. The core values instilled in them by each set of parents defined them as adults and permeate the entire book: fierce independence, loyalty, responsibility and a sense of adventure.

As a young couple, Alex and Jennifer shared many adventures together: climbing, travelling, paddling and just trying to earn a living. They appeared a perfect match, and Jennifer's rendition of their experiences suggests a charmed existence. It wasn't until child-rearing responsibilities emerged that their life of adventure shifted, with Alex heading off alone more and more frequently. By this time, Alex had assumed an almost legendary reputation as an athlete. His appetite for training, his enviable climbing skills and his caffeine-enhanced energy levels were intimidating to most. As his reputation grew, so did the opportunities, including one that shaped the latter part of his climbing career. Invited to become a member of the elite North Face climbing team, Alex soon found himself on a never-ending series of expeditions to exotic locales, inevitably followed by an equally prolonged series of lectures and sales meetings arranged by his generous sponsor.

But from every precipitous portaledge perch, claustrophobic ice cave excavation, or frenetic outdoor equipment convention, Alex stayed in touch with Jennifer, and it is his letters that provide this book with a very personal, intimate glimpse into an unusual family. The letters, together with his journal entries, help to illuminate the struggles and compromises that were a necessary part of a relationship where one partner attempts to understand, and accommodate, the other's need for adrenalin, adventure and

– ultimately – risk.

Still, throughout all of his climbing expeditions, Alex had an unwavering confidence in his ability to survive, as well as his steadfast commitment to family. In a letter to Jennifer written just prior to a three-month guiding job on Everest, he said; 'Although I will always want to climb, I will continue to weigh my decisions according to the desire to grow old with you… I will base my mountaineering judgment upon the promise and commitment to return to you.'

The supporting cast in this warm and touching memoir includes their three sons, Sam, Max and Isaac, a number of close climbing friends, a few family members and, most importantly, Alex's good friend and most frequent climbing companion, Conrad Anker. The shared joy in their friendship fairly jumps off the page of the jacket back cover photograph of Alex and Conrad, taken by photographer Chris Noble while they were together on a climbing expedition in Kyrgyzstan. Conrad was also Alex's partner on the tragic Shishapangma expedition, and it was an instantaneous instinctive reaction to run one way rather than the other that saved Conrad's life and snuffed out Alex's. The depth of Conrad's despair at Alex's death was considerable. In a letter to Jennifer he admitted, 'A terrific guilt is upon my soul…' But along with that guilt, emerged another feeling – one of enormous responsibility and, finally, love. He grew increasingly close to Jennifer and the three boys and eventually, they became a family. Ironically, it was Conrad who was eventually able to realize Alex's dream, which Alex articulated in a letter years earlier: 'Makes me realize that what I really want to do is climb more with my sons and show them what I love in mountaineering.'

This volume explores many important themes of Alex's life, particularly his deep feelings for his family and his love of wild landscapes and mountaineering. But although we learn of Alex's expeditions to the most remote corners of the globe, including one of his favourites, to Queen Maud Land in Antarctica, we see them primarily from Jennifer's perspective. Other than his letters, which are mainly of a personal nature, there is insignificant input about these important, difficult, sometimes groundbreaking ascents from his climbing partners. We glean little information about the historical context of his climbs and have a limited grasp of their difficulty or technical details based on his reports. That history of Alex Lowe, alpinist, remains to be written and, based on the significance of his climbing career, it deserves to be documented.

Candid and remarkably well told, *Forget Me Not* is a story of adventure, passion, struggle, and hope. Most importantly, it is a story of love. It was the winner of the American National Outdoor Book Award for mountain literature in 2008 and was a finalist at the Banff Mountain Book Festival.

Bernadette McDonald

Himalayan Tribal Tales
Oral Tradition and Culture in the Apatani Valley
Stuart Blackburn
Brill, 2008, pp300, €69

Stuart Blackburn's first task in setting about the study of the oral tradition of the Apatanis in Arunachal Pradesh was to learn the language, not easy when there is no written text and the Apatani villagers are not particularly interested in talking to you. He solved it by loitering at a roadside shop that sold soap, candles and other dry goods, and by riding the local bus, trying out phrases on people going to market, getting his language lessons 'on the sly'.

It was four frustrating weeks before Blackburn was able to record his first tale – of two sisters (one good, one stupid) and a snake-husband – and this followed his attendance at a ritual in which a priest had slit open the belly of a small pig and examined the three sections of its liver for omens. Often the circumstances of Blackburn's research are as engaging as the stories themselves. The result is both a serious piece of academic work that adds to our understanding of oral traditions around the world and a highly readable account of the role of myths, legends, trickster tales and ritual chants in the life and identity of the Apatanis.

The Apatanis are a tribe of sedentary agriculturalists living in a narrow valley at 5,000ft in the eastern Himalaya. There are about 30,000 of them, speaking an unwritten Tibeto-Burman language and following a form of animism – though as Blackburn points out, contrary to the general idea of animism rendering spirits visible in some form, what distinguishes the 150 plus Apatani spirits from humans is their invisibility. Maintaining what sounds like an uneasy truce or alliance with this spirit world through the chanting of ritual texts and sacrifice requires constant observance.

The meat of book are the stories collected by Blackburn, a folklorist at the University of California, Berkeley, on extended visits between 2000 and 2006. He divides them into three categories: Tales, with man-eating monsters, magic trees and mistreated heroines in a Grimm-like panoply; Myths and Histories, dealing with the beginnings of the world and the Apatani ancestors, migration over the mountains from Tibet (an origin Blackburn regards as unlikely despite its hold in the tribal story); and the all-important Ritual Texts, delivered in a special speech, mostly by male priests, to communicate with the spirit world to, for example, ensure prosperity or protect someone from danger. Interestingly, for all the exotic cast of their stories, Apatanis do not make the usual distinction between myth and legend (as believed to have a kernel of truth) and 'once upon a time' folktales. All are believed to have happened.

Irrepressible throughout is the figure of Abo Tani, the first human and the father of all the Tani people of central Arunachal Pradesh. He is a variant of that international folk hero, the trickster – 'clever, amoral and sexually ambitious… a Rabelaisian character who mocks authority and

strictures,' as Blackburn puts it. But Abo Tani is more than that; the son of a spirit, he is also the negotiator in that delicate alliance between spirits and humans and today, as 'ancestor', he has become an identity figure for the Apatanis in a changing world. Half a century ago, Abo Tani, like the spirits, was never seen; now his image is everywhere – 'hair wound into the distinctive knot and skewered with a brass pin, a large machete slung over his shoulder' – on posters, calendars and even the signs of the Abo Tani Wine Shop.

Himalayan Tribal Tales forms part of publisher Brill's Tibetan Studies Library. The reviewer came across the book by chance at the British Museum, on sale in conjunction with an exhibition 'Between Tibet and Assam – cultural diversity in the eastern Himalayas'. Blackburn acknowledges that not all of the Apatani's stories are 'a good read' – particularly the ritual texts, but that's not their purpose – however the challenge he set himself was to take readers at least some way inside a tribal and animistic culture. In that he has succeeded. Those for whom travel in the mountains has led to a keen interest in the myriad individuals tilling plots of buckwheat by the wayside, bearing burdens of firewood and fodder, or serving trays of *dal bhat*, will be enlightened by this book.

Stephen Goodwin

Explorers of the Infinite
Maria Coffey
Tarcher/Penguin, 2008, pp288, $26.95

This is a book that will either fascinate or frustrate, or possibly both. It won the American Alpine Club Literary Award in 2009 and carries an endorsement from the American Boardman-Tasker winning novelist Jeff Long for 'daring to tackle the taboos and sacred cows'. It is a follow-up to Coffey's series of interviews about grief reported in her book *Where the Mountain Casts Its Shadow* (2003) and its sub-title tells you how: *The secret spiritual lives of extreme athletes – and what they reveal about near-death experiences, psychic communication, and touching the beyond*.

Explorers of the Infinite begins with the issue of high altitude mountaineers seeing ghosts and goes, in its final chapter, 'Beyond Extremes' to the author's own return from death by drowning. Surfers, cyclists, kayakers, BASE jumpers, deep water freedivers, high-wire walkers, ultra-marathoners, polar explorers, skiers and skydivers join climbers and mountaineers in revealing some weird experiences that represent what Coffey calls their 'secret spiritual lives'. In the opening chapter addiction to the mental state achieved by climbers pushing themselves very hard becomes, in the words of the Mexican mountaineer Carlos Carsolio, 'spiritual addiction'. Chapters on 'Fear' and 'Suffering' lead to cases of intense connection with the environment, including interspecies communication. A chapter on anticipating death is titled 'Remembering the Future'. 'Spirit Friends' leads to

'Wandering Spirits' and then to 'Spiritual Tools'. The latter, it turns out, are closely related to forms of controlled breathing and link levitation, out-of-body experiences and apparent returns from death. These are, indeed, fascinating dimensions of human experience that few of us will not have either encountered ourselves, or read about more than once in mountaineering literature.

In my limited experience it is misleading, even sensationalising, to associate this realm of perception with the most extreme achievements of mountaineering. One person's easy route is another person's extreme experience. Soloing, for example, at any level, will sooner or later bring about an unexpectedly intense encounter with the materials in hand. I remember finding myself inexplicably in tears at the end of a long pitch of friction climbing in Tuolumne Meadows. It didn't feel like fear or relief from fear, but a kind of joy at oneness with the grains of that herringbone rock. I didn't need to call it a spiritual experience – more like an animal one – but some people do. On the other hand, it is surely useful to review the possibilities of one's death before an Alpine climb, hoping that such dreams do not provide Maria Coffey with another case of 'remembering the future'. Ultimately my frustration with this book is not concerned with the language given to these dimensions available to human life in risk-taking relationships with the elements. It is with the disconnection between different kinds of language, the anecdote and the scientific research.

This book is really a kind of anthology of stories and some possible explanations, except that the scientific material is not discussed and evaluated as an adequate or inadequate explanation, but rather dropped in between the anecdotes. In one page the text can jump from a lively spoken narrative to the specialised discourse of one researcher and back again. I'm all in favour of giving each mode of discourse equal status, of science speaking to experience, and of anecdote in dialogue with research findings. The problem is that the style of this book is simply to juxtapose these two voices without any linking evaluative discussion that might help readers begin to sift the blazing insights from the bullshit. All voices from all adventurers and all scientists are regarded as being equally true. In fact, we know that in this field of enquiry in particular, it is just possible to find a joker or a charlatan. The sense of a neutral anthology of material being offered to the reader is endorsed by the fact that the selected references for each chapter simply list books by adventurers and researchers.

But I've not given a sense of the insights such juxtapositions can sometimes produce. BASE jumpers have to process information fast in freefall. What the Swiss neuroscientist Peter Brugger calls a 'Type 1 error' is in perceiving a pattern where none exists. A 'Type 2 error' is failing to recognise a pattern when it does exist. From an evolutionary perspective, he points out, 'if you miss the tiger hiding in the grass, you're dead. If you're always seeing tigers, you're running away a lot, but you're not dead.' Coffey goes on to tell a story about the BASE jumper from New Zealand, Duane Thomas, who, with his friend Shaun Ellison, was assisting Leo

Holding and Tim Emmet in their first jumps from a cliff in the Lauterbrunnen valley. Then Thomas made his own jump. He was seen to reach back to deploy his parachute and, without apparent struggle, he simply left his hand there on the pilot chute and hit the ground. Shaun Ellison is convinced that when, unusually, he had shaken the hand of Thomas before his jump, Thomas had seen a premonition of his own death in Ellison's eyes. 'Don't ever look at me like that again', said Thomas, totally out of character. Ellison's conclusion is: 'I think we were both tapping into other levels of consciousness.' Coffey's conclusion is: 'An early warning. Ignored. A Type 2 error – fatal.'

In the same way that some mountaineers take Jim Curran's history of K2 to read at K2 base camp, this might be a book to take on a trip, not just to fuel hours of storm-bound discussion, but to learn to avoid 'remembering the future'.

Terry Gifford

A Man's Life: Dispatches from Dangerous Places

Mark Jenkins

Rodale Press USA, 2007, pp368, US$25.95

Mark Jenkins readily admits to what he describes as 'the incurable disease of mountain guides, foreign correspondents, and all kinds of adventurers: We yearn to go, but we don't want to leave.'

It wasn't always that way for Jenkins. Travelling hard since the age of 16, he is a veteran of hard beds, bad water and pain. Former monthly adventure columnist for *Outside* magazine, Jenkins wandered the globe, from the mountains of Afghanistan to the Turkish coast of Gallipoli. His partners were often legends in their own right: Greg Mortenson, Yvon Chouinard, Aron Ralston. His destinations were such that arrival was often uncertain and intact return, even more so. His passion for travel was intense: 'I cannot get enough of the world. To smell it, walk through it, sink the teeth of my mind into it.' Fortunately for his readers, his insights and literary talents produced equally passionate tales of his physical, intellectual and spiritual journeys. *A Man's Life* is the second volume of his almost 10 years of work at *Outside* magazine, following *The Hard Way,* published in 2002.

But *A Man's Life* is not simply a chronological sequel. Jenkins' approach to travel and adventure, to danger and risk, has shifted in this volume, and its title belies what is really going on. Of course he is older and presumably more mature, but the fundamental difference is that his personal life has changed. Now a family man with a wife and two daughters, Jenkins' departures become increasingly painful and his own spectacular experiences on the road are constantly weighed against the more poignant home life he is inevitably missing: birthdays, first steps, dinner parties and childhood bruises. He describes his departure for an unclimbed peak in Burma when his daughter Addi was 20 months old. She happily helps him pack, playing

with his climbing equipment and climbing into his cozy, alpine sleeping bag clad only in her diaper. Everything is going along swimmingly until the airport, when Addi finally figures it out. 'Daddy…' she says, lip quivering. As Jenkins recalled, 'The look of shock and hurt and betrayal in her huge brown eyes crushed me more than any avalanche ever could.'

Yet he manages the knife-edged balancing act and gets out there, month after month. Long days, rock-fall, unconsolidated snow slopes, punishing temperatures, surly armed customs officers and campfires are his companions. Many of his stories are about climbing. He is an accomplished climber, yet writes deprecatingly and with humour about his exploits. Despite his refreshingly light approach, his position on climbing ethics is firm. 'Why we climb is personal, but *how* we climb… is communal. How we climb defines the spirit of our sport… directly impacts not just the practice and future of mountaineering, but the health of the mountain environment.' Although a strong supporter of the Tyrol Declaration, Jenkins ultimately throws the decision on style back to the individual. 'We are what we do. And style *is* substance.'

The 37 stories in *A Man's Life* are vivid, amusing, gritty and infused with raw emotion. Winner of the 2008 Banff Mountain Book Award for adventure travel, it was described by jury member John Harlin as 'the definition of excellence in serious writing about serious adventure'. Harlin concludes, 'The only thing that rivals Jenkins's enthusiasm for putting himself into harm's way in exotic places is his love for crafting stories after coming home to his family in Laramie, Wyoming.'

A Man's Life is the result of that love and talent for crafting stories and I would highly recommend it.

Bernadette McDonald

Revelations

Jerry Moffatt (with Niall Grimes)

Vertebrate Publishing, 2009, pp 256, £20

I'm pretty well convinced that the high point of technical 'trad' climbing, and sport climbing for that matter, was the 1980s. It was the decade when training techniques approaching athletic rigour were applied to the more open-ended mindset of the aid-eliminating pioneers of the Seventies, with spectacular results. The classic super-desperate and serious test pieces of today, *Parthian Shot*, *New Statesman*, *Master's Wall*, *Indian Face*, *The Quarryman*, *Mandela*, *Revelations*, *Gaia* and *Totally Free* were all products of the Eighties. Since then, progress has been one of degree, with the application of a bouldering mentality to sport routes (just how small can the holds be?), a highball bouldering mentality to the ever-dwindling supply of unclimbed lines on grit (just how injured are you prepared to be if you fall off?) and a near-soloing mentality to the super-bold routes from the likes of MacLeod and Birkett on mountain crags (just how dead are you prepared to be?).

Back in the Eighties, one of the leading lights of the climbing scene, and certainly one of its most colourful characters, was Jerry Moffatt. His autobiography, *Revelations*, co-written with Niall Grimes (and edited by Ed Douglas), is the story of a remarkable climbing career.

Moffatt started climbing whilst at school near Llandudno and the early part of the book chronicles the all too familiar pattern of death-defying early days on rock. It's said that God protects drunks and small children, and the latter is particularly relevant to Moffatt's early escapades.

As with most climbing autobiographies, it's the early, non-climbing detail that proves the most interesting. We discover, for example, that Jerry had learning difficulties (in the literal sense, not the PC euphemism) and dyslexia as a child – but excelled at sport, particularly rugby. Once Moffatt discovers climbing, his life changes and there are familiar tales of living rough and obsessive climbing behaviour, the latter resulting in prodigious bouldering skills and a long line of spectacular climbs, including an orgy of soloing on Dinas Cromlech, which culminates in a death-cheating first ascent of *Master's Wall* on Cloggy.

The book goes on to describe Moffatt's involvement with gear development, motorbikes, competition climbing, and a fight with career-threatening injury caused by over-training. *Revelations* provides insight into a crucial decade in world climbing by one of its most influential players.

Bernard Newman

A Passion for Nature: The Life of John Muir

Donald Worster

Oxford University Press, 2008, pp535, £18.99

To come straight to the point, this book lacks an essential reference to the *Alpine Journal* and as a consequence fails to fully engage with Muir as either a mountaineer or as a mountaineering writer. Sir Edward Peck, in *AJ* No 99, 1994 (reprinted in *John Muir: His Life and Letters and Other Writings*, Bâton Wicks, 1996), evaluates Muir as a mountaineer and suggests that Muir's account of his solo first ascent of Mount Ritter 'belongs to the finest tradition of mountaineering literature'. The American historian of mountaineering literature, David Mazel, says that 'Muir was the most skilled American climber of his day' (*Pioneeering Ascents: The Origins of Climbing in America, 1642-1873*, 1991, p. 233). Rather than using Mazel, in his new biography of Muir, the environmental historian Donald Worster uses James Ramsey Ullman's 1956 *The Age of Mountaineering* to contextualise Muir's attitude towards mountains as a mountaineer. This leads him to Ruskin and the old misunderstanding that Ruskin believed that 'mountain gloom' was a quality inherent in the mountains themselves. In fact, Ruskin was referring in *Modern Painters* to the crucifixes and the morbid gloom he found in the indigenous human culture in the Alps. So for Worster to say that 'Muir saw only glory, and never any gloom, in his mountains' (188) is to repeat Muir's own misreading of Ruskin to claim the 'glory' of mountains

for himself in contrast with Ruskin. With these reservations out of the way, one can welcome this new biography of Scotland's major contribution to American environmental and mountaineering history.

This is only the second life of John Muir that has gone back to original sources and it is a great advance upon Frederick Turner's *Rediscovering America: John Muir in his Time and Ours* (1985). Here is a more complicated and a more contextualised Muir whose contradictions are not avoided: Scottish, educated in America, professional engineer and part-time botanist, a sustainer of friendships with women who could not broach marriage, a serious horticulturalist who could resist the pull of the wild for a decade, a wealth-accumulating businessman who valued simplicity, friend of those railroading America who nevertheless spoke for wilderness, and ultimately man of compromise whose writings demanded entrenched conservationist positions. Worster has produced a fresh and more nuanced version of Muir that is a riveting read.

Although Worster is shaky on general Scottish historical background (Surely even Americans should know that Mary Queen of Scots was beheaded, not 'hanged'?) his detailed research in the National Archives of Scotland reveals that Muir's father was a wealthy and powerful man in Dunbar, popular with voters and with a reputation for probity. But it was the rejection of every form of church available that took Daniel Muir to Edinburgh to hear Alexander Campbell speak of the clergy-free gatherings he had established in America. Within a few months Daniel Muir determined that the family would 'take the boat', along with Highland families at the height of the Clearances in 1849.

It is in the richness of its detail and its historical contexts that this biography makes its mark. Worster's knowledge of the environmental history of the West leads to some telling observations: 'Muir had arrived in the West at precisely the moment when new careers in scientific exploration were being made'. But actually government sponsored geologists and botanists were funded to promote industrial and agricultural exploitation of the landscapes they explored. Muir's devotion to both empiricism and spiritual renewal sometimes resulted in his missing the political motivations of others. This gives an interesting and topical twist to the old and continuing debate of the preservationists versus the conservationists which resolves itself into the issue of 'How much use?', or indeed, 'How much management?' – the very issue which provoked the foundation of The John Muir Trust here in the UK in the face of encroaching signage, trails, and visitors' centres, or military usage of wilderness.

Like the original motivation for the JMT, Muir wanted to provide and publicise a good example that others might be encouraged to follow. But the motivations of some of the others established a context in which to be a non-interventionist was to win the moral battle, but lose the landscape war. The later Muir's lobbying with a politically astute publicist – Robert Underwood Johnson – won many local and short-term battles, but actually probably lost the long-term war, we might observe as we review the

Bush legacy. Saving some forests and parks did not ultimately challenge the American dream's notion of growth, or its values grounded in wealth, which have regularly won the big political debates about landscape values. (Has saving some Scottish estates by the JMT offered strong enough alternative values to challenge the capitalist power driving the necessary alternative energy business in Scotland? Victory in the battle against bolts in the Alps [by no means assured] would be pyrrhic if in waging it we ignore the greater war against climate change, or even consort with the enemy by flying so much. I speak as one more sinning than sinned against.)

Worster does not duck such issues. Muir was prepared to sacrifice 'ordinary' landscapes (Lake Eleanor, within Yosemite National Park) to save 'extraordinary' ones (Hetch-Hetchy Valley, also within the park). 'Politically, the distinction would be difficult to make and susceptible to economic influence,' comments Worster. During the long years of San Francisco's campaign to turn the Hetch-Hetchy Valley into a reservoir for the city's water supply, Muir and the Sierra Club were 'not paying attention' when a bill was passed permitting water conduits through the National Park.

And ultimately Muir was not supported in this fight by his rich friends: 'The sad lesson staring Muir in the face was that those who already had plenty of wealth could be weak, undependable allies in the struggle.' Muir had dictated his memoirs of Scotland and Wisconsin, *My Boyhood and Youth*, at the Lake Klamath country retreat of the West's railway magnate, Edward Harriman. (Worster points to a current debate that Muir ignored about draining the Klamath Basin, a nationally important wildlife refuge, for agricultural land.) But Harriman failed to support Muir in the Hetch-Hetchy campaign. The openness to nature that Muir found in some of his rich friends did not ultimately moderate their belief in 'economic growth, national expansion, and material values above everything else'.

This is very far from being a biography that is sceptical about Muir's sustained influence. With the strong regional and national presence of the Sierra Club in America, a worldwide network of national parks, a thriving and increasingly urgent international conservation movement and the establishment of a John Muir Trust in the UK, how could it not be? But it is a biography that thoughtfully raises issues for readers in the present. Muir's dilemmas and compromises still face us in new forms, not least in the issues of wind farms, dams, and other environmental balancing acts being debated in the land of Muir's birth. This wonderfully readable book ends with the words: 'Muir was a man who tried to find the essential goodness in the world, an optimist about people and nature, an eloquent prophet of a new world that looked to nature for its standards and inspiration. Looking back at the trail he blazed, we must wonder how far we have yet to go.'

Terry Gifford

Meetings on The Edge
Mags MacKean
The In Pinn, 2008, pp198, £14.99

In 2005 Mags MacKean did what so many of us only dream of; she abandoned her 10-year career as a BBC journalist and took to the mountains. She wanted to 'originate her own stories' instead of interpreting those of others second-hand and to continue a love affair, begun during her ascent of Kilimanjaro, with 'the process of moving uphill'.

These restless urges took her around the globe on a series of extreme physical challenges. It was a long road of emotional and spiritual awareness, peopled by unusual and often influential characters whose random acts of kindness led her to question and redefine her understanding of security. Their outstretched hands marked the landscape she moved through in a way that maps never could: 'It is the human face of the environment that makes its geography so memorable.' A lady of remarkable independence of spirit led her to the mayor of Baillestavy in the eastern Pyrenees who provided her with food and shelter, saving her from an uncomfortable night in a primitive woodstore. Phillipe, a Belgian encountered in a mountain hut, taught her to find the way through unpredictable terrain and to adapt to its demands on her energies and resourcefulness.

MacKean's 70-day solo walk across the Pyrenees forms the backbone of the book whilst other journeys and expeditions weave in and out, illuminating a train of thought begun earlier or establishing a pattern in friendships made along the way. Climbing in the Cascades, ascending Denali, mountaineering in New Zealand, attempting Pisang Peak: all these natural classrooms afford her the opportunity to consolidate skills and bind herself to her companions with an understanding forged out of endurance and mutual support.

The writing is immensely readable, compact and cinematic in its descriptions and peppered with a lively sense of humour, largely generated by unlikely juxtapositions - the naked flasher she encounters on her first day in the remoteness of the Pyrenees, the exotically handsome Nepali film star on holiday with her in Mull, the giant spiders which cause her to scream repeatedly during a strictly silent retreat in the Garhwal.

MacKean evokes a strong sense of place, not merely as a backdrop but as a commentary on her emotional development. At first she finds the landscape hostile, the uncertainty of the way ahead disturbing, but as her journey continues she finds a harmony in her surroundings and an understanding of 'resourceful outdoor living' which shapes and strengthens her reactions to future events. Most telling of all, she begins to understand her focus should not be on continual activity – seeking a new goal as soon as she has realised the last – but on knowing herself well enough to understand what would be best to do next. As she states so succinctly: 'Life is never a destination to reach but a state of becoming.'

Val Randall

Himalayan Playground: Adventures on The Roof of the World, 1942-72
Trevor Braham (foreword by Doug Scott)
The In Pinn, 2008, pp120, £9.99

Trevor Braham's climbing career spanned the 'golden age' of Himalayan mountaineering, when the principal peaks were climbed one by one, and climbing parties penetrated into hitherto unmapped and unvisited areas. The first trip recorded in this book is a trek in 1942 along the well-known Singalila Ridge. Approached from Darjeeling (where he went to school), the Ridge goes due north towards Kangchenjunga, along the border between Nepal and Sikkim. Clearly it was for him a case of love at first sight.

Four further visits to Sikkim are recorded here, with increasingly ambitious objectives. The series was interrupted, if that is the right word, by an invitation to go as a 'guest member' (no doubt also a very useful, if unofficial, liaison officer) with a Swiss party in Garhwal in 1947. With them Trevor climbed Kedarnath Dome, finding himself surprisingly fit at 6830m. On return, he left the party, they going west to Gangotri while he struck east, then south and finally north-east, to the Bhyundar Pass, and so east and south-west over the Kuari Pass to 'civilisation'. Travel through the mountains, rather than peak bagging, was always his first love. But he thought he ought to learn to climb 'properly' and took himself off to the Valais, where he had three seasons with his friend Arthur Lochmatter, the last in 1956.

Apart from Sikkim and Garhwal, visits to other areas are recorded – Kulu and Spiti, visited with Peter Holmes at a time when the environment could be described as 'mediaeval' and streams had not been bridged, even by a log – Karakoram, Swat/Kohistan, Kaghan. Even this list is not exhaustive. Based initially in Calcutta, where he was apprenticed to his father's import/export business, Trevor was able to get away to the hills almost every year. He was also incidentally a very active member of the Himalayan Club, editing the *Himalayan Journal* and serving as Vice-President and a committee member for many years.

He just mentions a trip in 1968, when he joined Sally and me, and Hugh Thomlinson, in a visit to the Kotgaz glacier of the Hindu Kush, close to the border of Afghanistan. By this time he was living and working in Pakistan. We took advantage of his familiarity with the local political setup (rather feudal at that time) and ability to organise our journey into the mountains. Unfortunately he and Hugh had to leave us before they could repeat our ascent of a 5680m peak on the frontier, or try any others.

I confess that I approached the book with some misgivings, wondering if it would consist largely of reprints from his *HJ* articles. Some of those, probably written more or less directly from diaries, have paragraphs more than a page long, full of detail about the routes followed – useful for people following in his footsteps but somewhat tedious to read. I need not have

worried. In just a few cases the book covers much the same ground, but more briefly and very readably. There is a lot about his travels through the mountains, often accompanied only by porters, which is new to me and very interesting. Good diagrammatic sketch maps, and very good photos, almost all Trevor's own, enable one to visualise his journeys. This is a most enjoyable book.

Mike Westmacott

Ararat: In Search of the Mythical Mountain
Frank Westerman (translated by Sam Garrett)
Harvill Secker, 2008, pp236, £16.99

While Mount Ararat is found in modern Turkey and is the nation's highest peak at over 4200m, it is nevertheless displayed at the centre of the Armenian coat of arms. The mountain is a national icon to the Armenians, who depict it topped by a massive boat to recall the statement in Genesis that Noah's Ark ran aground on Ararat as the waters receded from the great flood. AC members who have stood there will vouch that in reality no vessel sits stranded on the summit, yet the search for archaeological remains goes on. Frank Westerman is no 'Arkaeologist' himself (the pun is irresistible) but in a wider sense he too is searching.

Christians have scoured Ararat for fragments of wood as physical testimony to a faith they appear already to possess in abundance. Westerman's interest in the mountain is more nebulous. His book explores the relation between religious belief and modern scientific knowledge by charting the way in which education displaced Christianity from his life. The facts of evolution and the earth's great age could not be reconciled with his parents' Protestantism. Although *Ararat* made the shortlist of the Boardman Tasker Prize for mountain literature this is not a book about mountaineering or even about mountains. Instead it uses Ararat as a metaphor for human and personal struggles with religion, science and nature.

At the heart of the flood story is man's relationship with the unpredictable, dangerous natural world, evoked in some of the book's most vivid passages. Westerman describes trekking across Holland's treacherous tidal mudflats in training for his climb and also childhood memories of a drilling rig swallowed following a gas eruption and of nearly drowning in a river surging with water released from an upstream reservoir. These passages contribute to *Ararat*'s intimate and often tentative tone. Some of the book's ideas are presented repeatedly but others are only hinted at. For example, Westerman notes that the retreat of Ararat's ice may be attributable to climate change, but he evades the terrible connections between the story of carnage brought about by human civilisation told in Genesis and the future that glacier retreat shows drawing closer.

Towards the end of the book, describing the days before his attempt at climbing Ararat, Westerman narrates an encounter with a pair of 'real

authentic Ark-seekers' from Russia. When a companion asks whether they have found the Ark, Westerman recoils from his sceptical friend's mockery of the inevitable response, that they have seen a boat-like object but could not quite reach it:

The fragile world of the Ark-seeker, I realised existed by virtue of not finding; his goal always had to remain beyond reach – this was what kept him going and lent purpose to his life. The Ark-seeker owed his singularity not to the Ark, but to the fact that he was seeking. And what I was doing, I reckoned, came down to exactly that.

It follows that the climb itself forms a coda to this thought, a journey made with the desire to have an experience, but not to be overcome.

Kathleen Palti

Contact
Mountain Climbing and Environmental Thinking
Edited by Jeffrey Mathes McCarthy
University of Nevada Press, 2008, pp242,£22.50

This collection of essays could stand alone as a worthwhile anthology of mainly American writers waxing about their engagement – sometimes intense – with nature through climbing. But Jeffrey McCarthy has a more ambitious purpose, namely to demonstrate his thesis that *climbing matters*. Really? While climbing matters to me personally, I rather thought Lionel Terray had caught its overall significance in that wonderful title *Conquistadors of the Useless*. But McCarthy begs to differ, seeing in climbing narratives, or at least in the best of them, the leading edge of society's attitude towards nature and the possibility of a cultural shift, reconnecting humans as part of nature and vice versa.

Perhaps the sharpest example of this connection comes in Yvon Chouinard's account, reproduced here, of his and T M Herbert's eight days on El Cap's Muir Wall in 1965. Physically exhausted yet so attuned to their vertical world, by day seven their senses are vivid. 'Each individual crystal in the granite stood out in bold relief,' Chouinard recalls. They're transfixed by cloud shapes and by tiny, brilliantly coloured bugs on the rock. 'This unity with our joyous surroundings, this ultra-penetrating perception gave us a feeling of contentment that we had not had for years.'

How could it be otherwise on the *Muir* Wall? The prophet of Yosemite permeates this book. Chouinard's heightened perception after a week on the wall sounds very similar to John Muir's own state on his ascent of Mount Ritter. Momentarily he becomes crag-fast, convinced he is going to fall while climbing a 50ft cliff, then 'life blazed forth again with preternatural clearness… muscles became firm again, every rift and flaw in the rock was seen as through a microscope'. And up he goes.

Muir, Chouinard, and probably some of you, it's a fairly simple sum: exhaustion + fasting (whether involuntary or Muir's dry crust frugality) + plus a nerve edge situation = intense perception and a powerful feeling of

unity with surrounding nature. But where does it get us? McCarthy isn't claiming that climbers are about to save the Planet; rather that we might be an indicator species, and that our writings, in moving from narratives of conquest to those of connection, presage a shift in society's attitude to nature.

Contact is a book where the Introduction is essential first reading. In it McCarthy explains the three categories into which he divides the collection: conquest, which is flags on summits of course, but interestingly the opponent might also be internal, 'the hungry, quivering, unruly self'; caretaking, which is probably where most folk are at the moment, it's national parks and conservation, but that's still treating nature as a resource for human use; and finally connection, where the climber and physical world cease to be separate but attain a harmony.

Inevitably the categories overlap and not all the stories stay in their appointed boxes. Besides Muir and Chouinard, the 23 authors featured include Steve House, Arlene Blum, Gary Snyder, Doug Robinson, Cam Burns, Henry David Thoreau and Terry Gifford. It's quite a cast and McCarthy marshals their stories well. While philosophers and ecologists cast about for a changed consciousness to solve environmental problems, McCarthy contends that narratives such as these offer a lived expression of the very shift they seek.

Stephen Goodwin

Auldjo
A Life of John Auldjo
Peter Jamieson
Michael Russell (Publishing) Ltd 2009, pp253, £24

Students of Alpine history will be familiar with the fact that John Auldjo made the 19th ascent of Mont Blanc in 1827 and published his highly readable account the following year. Some may also know of his time in Naples and his important studies of Vesuvius, which led to his being admitted to Fellowship of the Royal Society. Few, however, will know much more of the intriguing life of this Victorian gentleman traveller and Peter Jamieson's book amply fills this void.

In painting out the vivid scenery of Auldjo's life, Mr Jamieson demonstrates that he is a master of digression. However, his digressions are invariably well informed, often fascinating in their own right and always relevant to his main theme. So, one is transported in turn to Montreal at the beginning of the 19th Century and the Scots run fur trade, Regency London, Naples and its vibrant social life in the 1830s, Constantinople, London again in the 1840s and 1850s and finally to Geneva in 1865 where Auldjo became Honorary British Consul in 1871. He finally died in Geneva in 1886. Along the way, Auldjo encounters many of the leading players of the era: Sir Walter Scott, Bulwer-Lytton, Dickens, Thackeray, Sir William

Gell, the Duke of Sussex, the Duke of Brunswick and even that other famous ascensionist of Mont Blanc, Albert Smith. The 'Index of Persons' runs to some 500 entries; indeed, there are so many characters in the book that it is sometimes a little difficult to keep track and at least an Auldjo family tree might have made life a little easier.

The latter part of Auldjo's life was marred by a major financial disaster, which caused him to sell up in London and flee to France and ultimately Geneva, effectively bankrupt. The causes of this have never been clear, but Mr Jamieson has appended an intriguing hypothesis to his book, which the reviewer will certainly not spoil for you.

This book certainly left one more than interested in pursuing further accounts of several of the events and many of the people described. The bibliography provided by Mr Jamieson not only facilitates this, but also demonstrates what a well-researched book this is.

Jerry Lovatt

The Apprenticeship of a Mountaineer:
Edward Whymper's London Diary 1855-1859
Edited by Ian Smith
London Record Society Volume XLIII, pp267, 2008, £25

This work comprises a transcription of all six notebooks, kept as daily diaries by Whymper in the five years leading up to the year of his first visit to the Alps, which was to determine the course of the rest of his life. However, it is not only that. In addition the editor has provided an extremely helpful introduction, which ably sets the context for Whymper's early life, covering his family background, the relevant social milieu of South London in the 1850s and an interesting section on wood engraving, the heart of the family business in which the young Edward was serving his apprenticeship. There is also a useful synopsis of his later life and several helpful appendices, in particular the Whymper family tree and key biographical details of more than 400 of the principal characters featuring in the Diary. Mr Smith's footnotes are also apposite and generally illuminating.

In the last major biography of Whymper, written by Frank Smythe and published as long ago as 1940, the author in transcribing a proportion of the Diary comes to the conclusion that it is a 'sad document' and that the young Whymper led a life of 'appalling monotony'. While there may be some truth in the latter, the former comment in no way does it justice. Smythe contended that its sadness lies in the fact that it shows how Whymper's spirit, intelligence and potential were somehow stultified by the monotony of his daily grind. Be that as it may, there is another side to the coin and that is that the effort to overcome these obstacles in his early life almost certainly made Whymper into the determined, strong, if difficult man he became in later years.

Whatever one's view on that, the Diary itself is far from sad for, when-

ever the monotony begins to take hold, some fascinating cameo appears, whether it be the saga of the launch of the Great Eastern, the first investitures of the Victoria Cross, an update on the latest from the Crimea or the Indian Mutiny. The young Whymper certainly lived in interesting times. Not only that, but he was also a strikingly mature and self-confident commentator on these events, for one who was a mere 14 years at the commencement of the Diary.

While there are virtually no hints of any interest in mountaineering, even as close as a year from his first Alpine tour, the Diary gives ample evidence of the strength of body and purpose that were to serve him so well in later years.

All in all, Mr Smith and the London Record Society have done us a considerable service in making more available this remarkable document and in presenting it in such a usable and interesting form.

Jerry Lovatt

Who's Who in British Climbing
Colin Wells
The Climbing Company, 2008, pp575, £20

The last book Colin Wells wrote was the splendid *A Brief History of British Mountaineering* which was completed in just six weeks to coincide with the opening of The National Mountaineering Exhibition at Rheged in July 2001. In contrast his most recent epic, *Who's Who in British Climbing* is a Very Big Book and has taken over six years to come into fruition. Nearly 600 pages long and containing some 700 mini-biographies of climbers, many dead, some still alive, it has involved a monumental amount of research on Colin's part. The result is not your traditional kind of *Who's Who*, which could have been dry and boring, but a funny, highly entertaining and often wholly irreverent and outrageous account of those who in Colin's totally non-scientific selection have done something interesting or significant to help make British climbing what it is today.

The idea for *Who's Who* was first mooted after Colin produced 'The 100 Most Memorable British Climbers of the Millennium' for *On the Edge* magazine in December '99. Apart from the extra time needed for research for this book, rumour has it that publication has been delayed for years while some entries were thoroughly scoured in case they were deemed possibly libellous for him and the *Climb* team. The idea has definitely been to entertain and in the preamble Colin quotes General Bruce, *Himalayan Wanderer*, 1934, 'This book has been written purely for amusement. Carping critics are asked to be indulgent to the author, who makes no claim to literary merit.' Carping critics there are as Colin forecast in his introduction when he identifies four groups of people who will hate this book, the main two being 'Everyone who is in it and... Everyone who isn't in it!'

One well-known Lakeland cragrat of the '50 and '60s complained to me

that there were 13 errors in his entry, but when I checked and found that most of the info had come from my old mate Trevor Jones's *Cumbrian Rock* I remembered that Trevor would never allow a bit of historical accuracy to ruin a good story. And Rossy does get two and a half pages. Despite some errors that have emerged and which Colin acknowledges, the majority of readers will find this book great for dipping into, but beware – it's addictive, very difficult to put down, and not to be taken too seriously.

An alphabetical layout has been adopted starting with two heavyweights, The Abraham Brothers (*Make it snappy*) and ending with another, Geoffrey Winthrop Young (*Romantically-inclined monoped who dreamt up the BMC – he's to blame)*. These witty (and sometimes corny) by-lines follow each name. Other examples are two of the several Joneses featured in the book: Crag – *Taff at the top* and Eric – *Two mugs of adrenaline and a flapjack please!!*

In between the Abrahams and GWY the 300 substantive entries are interspersed with briefer descriptions of climbers who have been grouped together under titles such as Lakeland climbers '50-60s; Welsh Wizards 1930-80s; Cider Drinkers: SW significant others; '80s Glam Rockers; Mountain Men and New Wave Alpinists. Although those featured are not in their normal alphabetical position, they can be easily found by reference to the index.

Alpine Club members past and present naturally figure prominently in this book and some may be offended or infuriated by Colin's wacky style. But for those with an interest in mountaineering history and who are prepared to accept that this is not intended as a definitive reference book, but rather a light-hearted charge through the activities and achievements of the key players in our strange sport, then they should have a copy.

Derek Walker

Östlich des Himalaya: Die Alpen Tibets

Tamotsu Nakamura

Detjen-Verlag, Hamburg 2008, pp288

Nyainqentanglha East, Kangri Garpo, Deep Gorge Country, Daxue Shan, Qonglai Shan… the names of the ranges capture the imagination and go on and on.

Tamotsu (Tom) Nakamura is single-handedly responsible for opening the eyes of the world to the fantastic mountain ranges between Lhasa and Chengdu – his 'Alps of Tibet'. As at April 2008 he lists only five of the 251 peaks exceeding 6000m here as having been climbed. Sometimes statistics say a lot.

The fact that this book is in German should not put off any non-German readers with an interest in the area. Here we have 288 pages packed full of stunning photographs and maps that capture the topography and culture of the area better than anything I have ever seen before. Tom has devoted his retirement to exploring this part of the world and this is his most com-

prehensive and revealing publication yet. A truly mouth-watering array of photographs and maps come together to form an absolute must for anyone with even a passing interest in the mountains and people 'east of the Himalaya'.

Tom has made some 30 visits to the area, making him by far the most knowledgeable person as to its secrets. He is masterful at recording what he sees and meticulous in his efforts to gather information from diverse sources in order to publish photographs and definitive maps for the benefit of adventurous-minded souls. A combination of satellite detail and skilful use of the latest mapping technology results in the maps standing out as inspirational pieces in their own right. The detail is such that I forever find myself revisiting them.

And it is not just the maps and mountain photographs that are inspiring. Even with only a rudimentary knowledge of German, text and photographs combine to give a vivid insight into both history and cultural heritage. This is a book for anyone with an interest in the area, not just mountaineers.

Die Alpen Tibets has been on my bedside table ever since I received a copy. Tom's photographs have already motivated me to visit the area four times. Now I find myself overwhelmed with more inspiring objectives and future plans. Suffice to say that few other books have had a look in since.

Thank you Tom.

This is an absolutely essential purchase for all with even the slightest interest in the 'Alps of Tibet'.

Mick Fowler

Shadows of a Changing Land
Peter Freeman
Polecat Press, 2008, pp184, £25

This is a spectacular book of photographs by Peter Freeman with the extra bonus of a fascinating polemical essay about the fate of upland landscapes by John Capstick.

Peter Freeman's photographs cover the Yorkshire Dales and the Lake District, effectively celebrating its beauty in all types of weather and season, while John Capstick's essay presents a history of the two national parks, very well informed from a farming, institutional, and local industry point of view, that presents the case for understanding the landscape as something forever changing, its present form being largely the result of centuries of action and industry by its inhabitants. He argues for preserving the dynamism and diversity of these landscapes in the face of popular and institutional assumptions that everything must stay the same.

The photographic images are memorable, (I liked particularly the one of Gable), with inventive cropping and often with an emphasis on the sky. He certainly has been repeatedly in the right place at the right time, making an effort to find new viewpoints to take pictures from. There are informative

notes on his planning technique using maps, fieldwork and Azimuth tables to make sure of the angle of light for a good picture (though the printing sometimes seems to me over-saturated with colour, sacrificing subtlety for impact).

The images of the Dales are quieter, and on the whole they show more interestingly the man-made contribution to the landscape of walls, barns, viaducts, and so on. There are some particularly fine photographs of Swaledale and Wensleydale showing the pattern of walls and barns covering the valley bottom and sides, illustrating one example of significant landscape change driven by economic demands – the enclosures of the 17th and 18th centuries – damned at the time, but which are now celebrated as beautiful and essential to the character of the landscape. Perhaps wind turbines will be similarly appreciated one day.

Capstick's essay shows that aesthetics on its own is a bad guide to what is right for the health of a landscape, and fundamentals like economic diversity, local pride and ecological wisdom are more likely to lead to a landscape that happens to have beauty as its by-product. What I find rich and fascinating about upland landscapes is what can be directly seen and read off the surface of the fellside about the long history of give and take between man and nature, geology and weather, long and short time-scales. The more one knows the more one can see of this, and Capstick's essay has certainly educated me. He makes the point that by taking advice from farmers as well as the host of government, academic, and NGOs that form the 'countryside management industry' we might get a better answer to the question 'what kind of upland landscape do we want?'

Julian Cooper

Climbing: Training for Peak Performance (Second Edition)
Clyde Soles
The Mountaineers Books, 2008, pp224, £14.99

It's a sad and unavoidable fact that wisdom is born of twenty-twenty hindsight. So the longer you live the wiser you get. Obvious you might cry, but application of wisdom once acquired is not a foregone conclusion, especially amongst climbers. Now, I'm not going on about that seemingly endless string of toe-curling indiscretions and *faux-pas* (usually alcohol induced) that stretch back to our collective youth, but a different kind of abuse, namely what we have put our bodies through in the pursuit of climbing. I shudder now at the retrospect of non-existent or ill-informed physical preparation and dangerous ego-driven party-tricks (arm-wrestling, dear God!) that were the norm back when 'Ah were a lad…' Admittedly bouldering and climbing wall training were going through a super-steep learning curve during the early Seventies, but most of us never stood back from it all to assess how to get the best out of our bodies and at the same time protect them from damage, immediate and latent. Ignorance was bliss.

Nowadays, of course, the average novice climber is infinitely better informed, or should be. There have been many informative articles on training and physical conditioning for climbers in the magazines over the years and most 'how-to' books include these topics.

One such book is *Climbing: Training for Peak Performance* by Clyde Soles. This is the Second Edition and something of a gem. The first thing you notice is that the author is no downy-chinned juvenile; that face beaming out of the photo has a few miles on the clock, which is reassuring. The whole tone of the book and writing style is liberally endowed with wit and pragmatism and in places a refreshing scepticism.

The author sets out not to stroke the honed, ripple-shouldered youth of the bouldering mats with unlimited time on their hands, but to provide training regimes relevant and accessible to the majority of climbers from all age groups, with mortal bodies and who inhabit a real world of conflicting priorities.

Soles provides that rare experience, text book attention to detail in a hugely readable form. Basically there's just about everything you need to know here about how training affects the body, what exercises do what and what regimes to follow to improve your climbing and reach your particular goals, whether it's bouldering, trad climbing, sport climbing, ice climbing, trekking and mountaineering. Soles also stresses the importance of 'cross-play' – those activities we do to complement climbing: running, road biking, mountain biking etc.

Gym-work is described simply and clearly, such as which resistance exercises work which muscles, important tips on how to do them safely and which exercises to avoid if you suffer from various injuries/chronic conditions.

The section on nutrition is detailed and enlightening, (oh, those days on Cloggy with no food or drink) and here Soles unleashes his irony on the hype surrounding patent diets and food supplements – a joy to read. Basically, there is, and always has been, only one weight controlling diet: take on fewer calories than you expend and you'll lose weight – and *vice versa*. Indeed, myth-busting seems to be a thread running through the whole book.

All the tailored eating and training regimes are presented in clear tabular form, with explanatory notes on why some things are of benefit and others a waste of time.

Throw in a straight-talking section on injury and rehab, and a hope-springs-eternal page for the ageing climber and you are presented with a must have, must read book.

So as I step back into the time-portal behind the climbing wall, having given the half-naked, half-baked youth with chalky hands an hour-long lecture on why he should pull his finger out and make something of his life, I hand him Clyde's book: 'Here, read this.'

Bernard Newman

The Complete Guide to Rope Techniques
for climbers, mountaineers and instructors
Nigel Shepherd
Frances Lincoln, 2007, pp 358, £12.99

Previous editions of Nigel Shepherd's book have been essential reading for trainee instructors for many years. Published first in 1990 as *A Manual of Modern Rope Techniques*, it soon superseded Bill March's *Modern Rope Techniques*, which was my reference when an aspirant mountain leader and instructor in the 1970s and 80s. It was complemented by *Further Modern Rope Techniques* in 1998, and the two volumes were combined into the *Complete Guide* in 2001. The latest edition brings the text up to date with recent developments in equipment, such as belay plate design and mini ascending devices, and has a much-improved range of over 200 clear colour photographs illustrating the techniques. Occasional anecdotes are used to illustrate and enliven a text that otherwise might be very dry. The revised layout and improved photography in this edition mean that it is straightforward to navigate and easy to understand.

As would be expected of a well-respected book that has undergone such an evolution, written by a past Training Officer of the British Association of Mountain Guides, there is little to fault in the techniques and how they are explained. The very few instances that I noticed were:

• The section about the placing of a Deadman anchor in snow is a minor exception to the clarity of the rest of the book. There are no photographs illustrating it, and no explanation of why the angles of placement quoted are so critical.

• There are occasional very small discrepancies between the instructions given in the main text and those in the captions to the photographs, such as in the explanation of passing a knot while lowering.

• There is no discussion of the potential dangers of backing up an abseil by clipping a French prusik into a harness leg loop, or of the alternative of extending the abseil device using a sling threaded through the harness and clipping the prusik into the harness belay loop.

• The discussion of the Croll ascender does not mention that it allows the much more efficient method of having the footloop ascender attached above the Croll, as is done by cavers.

While there are still a number of sections specifically aimed at those preparing for assessment for the Single Pitch Award and Mountain Instructor Award, much of the material that was presented separately in previous editions has been integrated into the main text. Many recreational climbers could learn much from studying this book during the occasional hut- or tent-bound wet day.

Steve Lenartowicz

Everyday Masculinities and Extreme Sport
Male Identity and Rock Climbing
Victoria Robinson
Berg Oxford, 2008, pp256, £19.99

For the majority of rock climbers this book is unlikely to offer an easy read. Without a familiarity with concepts of gender and arcane sociological language, the main tenets of the thesis are elusive. Throughout, there is a puzzling mixture of laypersons' language such as 'everyday', contrasting with such sociological terms as 'problematize', 'illusio' and 'hegemonic masculinities'.

Those who do enjoy a literary challenge in the genre of social science could be tempted to reflect on aspects of their identity and where they might place themselves along a continuum of masculinity. Their musings might lead them to consider whether they experience discord or harmony in moving between their sport and domestic or social situations. It may even cause them to reflect on how friends and colleagues who do not climb find their behaviour bizarre. In chapter 6 there are some interesting references to male climbers who describe emotional aspects of their experiences on rock and the intimacy they share with other climbing partners.

This must have been a challenging and complex topic to explore. The author is a climber and has relatives and close friends who are active in the sport. However, as an active mountaineer for more than 50 years I believe that only a minority of male or female climbers would be so introspective as to scrutinise their behaviour either on or off the crags. Most of them would be preoccupied with getting on with the activity by responding to the physical challenge and very personal enjoyment of the sport.

The author describes the nature of the background investigation as 'empirical'. As a scientist, I find the method more characteristic of a pilot study and the book is essentially discursive. The outcome of statements from a sample of 47 people who were given a semi-structured interview is used throughout to draw inferences on everyday masculinities. (Fourteen of the 47 were female but six of these did not climb.) Apparently this is a small, heterogeneous sample and it seems to me to be quite unrepresentative of the current population of climbers.

Furthermore, there is an unfortunate time gap of more than five years between the interviews and the publication of the book. During this time, attitudes to gender differences in sport, and particularly in climbing, have changed. There is now far less of a distinction between the performance and climbing technique of males and females. The process of standardising masculine behaviour using comments from the interviews allows little room for the variation and individuality which are the essence of human behaviour. Unfortunately, many of the statements quoted from the interviewees are so banal. In contrast, the complex language used by the author to extract from them any significance to illustrate her thesis lacks conviction. For example, in the context of masculinity, 'you need to go out and

scare yourself, you need to go out and remember...'

To those AC members and other climbers who are social scientists this book could provide some interesting perspectives on masculinity and extreme sport. To those in other disciplines it offers some insight into how theories of gender and feminism add other dimensions to this sport and the sub-culture to which we belong.

Marjorie Mortimer

Staying Alive in Avalanche Terrain
Bruce Tremper
The Mountaineers Books, 2008, 304pp, US$18.95

Staying Alive in Avalanche Terrain provides a comprehensive overview of the issues connected to safe travel in snow-covered mountains; and the author, Bruce Tremper, is an acknowledged avalanche expert in the USA. The first edition (2001) set the current standard for avalanche textbooks, and this second edition (2008) brings the original work up to date, for example by including new techniques for stability tests. The challenge for any avalanche education is to be able to explain the causes and avoidance of avalanches in a way that distinguishes the key principles from interesting detail. Such discrimination is not an easy task in a textbook. In this case, to help make his message as user-friendly as possible, Tremper draws from his considerable personal experience and uses a modest approach, informal style, and thought-provoking quotations.

The book draws on an extensive body of data gathered in North America and Europe, and gives some global perspectives. However, as would be expected given the author's work and location, there is a bias towards the circumstances and hazards that are typical in North America. Hence, it is important to be aware that in other mountain regions the balance of considerations will be different to answer the key question anyone travelling in avalanche terrain should consider, that is: how to avoid being an avalanche victim.

The usual persuasive key facts are highlighted (perhaps the most important being that in a very high percentage of fatal avalanche incidents the trigger was the victim or another person). The text is supported with many diagrams, graphs and photographs, which would be improved if they were in colour. The use of analogies will work for some readers, and not for others.

As the author makes clear, the book is not a substitute for training and practice in the field. If you are considering a career as a snow sports professional in North America then this book is an essential text; for others it is a useful reference point for a deeper understanding of what is both a simple and complex subject, which when pursued as a mountain traveller can be most unforgiving of errors and omissions.

Roger Payne

Scottish Winter Climbs

Andy Nisbet, Rab Anderson and Simon Richardson

Scottish Mountaineering Trust, 2008, pp386

I was surprised and somewhat flattered when the *AJ* editor asked me if I wanted to review the SMC guidebook to Scottish Winter Climbs. I am pleased to say that Scottish winter climbing has always had a strong pull on the Tunstall body; my early years of climbing in the eighties often saw me leaving work in London with a full rucksack to meet up with Fowler and the other equally mad individuals prepared to drive the 10 hours plus to some remote outpost of the Highlands, typically arriving just in time to park the car and start the walk-in to the crag of choice. It was no surprise that some 20 years later when the opportunity arose, I switched base and moved from being a London-to-Scotland commuter to being a 'local', living in Aboyne, Aberdeenshire.

After the move I found I was no longer climbing exclusively with my own friends but had started to spend time with other 'locals', several of whom are the main drivers behind the SMC guides. Tom Prentice, Simon Richardson and Andy Nisbet have all been recent climbing partners, though I'm not sure 'partner' is the correct word. I meet them where they choose, try and keep up on the walk-in and then belay them, usually in bad weather on some obscure cliff while they tick off yet another unclimbed line.

My other confession, prior to starting a review, is to confess that I've spouted on for many hours to anyone who would listen as to how I have found the SMC guidebooks to be works of climbing art. Never does the Cairngorm guide get carried to a crag. That role is given to previous editions, amended if a recent route is to be attempted, while the latest guide holds prime position on the lounge table, waiting to be read as and when TV gets boring, which is often. I don't understand how it came to be overlooked by the Boardman Tasker judges.

Given the above, you would expect that my order for *Scottish Winter Climbs* would have been lodged well before publication date. But why buy a general guide when you have the regional ones? (I acquired that Scottish tendency, never spend money unless essential.) Then winter turns up, dousing the Cairngorms in metres of snow and somehow missing the Ben, while freezing Skye and the Southern Highlands down to temperatures not seen for years. Expert advice was needed so I called Tom Prentice who was quick to say, 'Aha, in these conditions go to Beinn an Dothaidh, it will be in perfect nick.' The clever man, it was a cliff not in any guide I owned. So out came the credit card and an order placed.

The route we climbed was excellent and in condition, so no complaints there, and to my surprise this new selected climbs guide has more or less replaced the regional guides for my own winter use. It wastes no words so is lighter yet seems to increase the options as regards which mountain best fits the latest conditions. The guide is clearly working, as I'm finding that cliffs I would have expected to be making fresh tracks to often have several

parties there, even midweek.

Following the latest BMC international meet I have been climbing with an Italian who is working in the oil industry in Aberdeen. He raves about the book; initially surprised by the 20 pages of introduction, he'd none the less found them all useful, and was inspired by the photos, showing both mixed and pure ice action. Even I, after 25 years of climbing in the Highlands, am inspired by the photos. Just seeing the image of *The Lamp* on Aladdin's Buttress, a route I had never heard of, made me want to kit up and start walking. Others like *Cut-throat* on Beinn Udlaidh make me pray for a rapid coming of the next ice age. The crag pictures with clear route lines make approaching and finding climbs as easy as it has ever been. The route descriptions are excellent, as one would now take for granted from these authors, although the pedant in me wondered why some routes get individual pitch descriptions while others do not.

As to their use of the star system, it was certainly hard to explain to my Italian friend how a climb with a two and a half hour approach that we climbed in less than 30 minutes could get three stars, or how another route in the same area qualified for four stars when, in his words, it has 'less than 50m of climbing'. We couldn't but notice that the sustained three-pitch mixed route of the same grade that we enjoyed the following weekend only received only one star. Maybe the time has come to remove the stars from selected climbs guides as surely if a climb is crap it won't be included.

In summary, yet another brilliant book from Messrs Nisbet, Anderson and Richardson. It is a book that should be bought by all members of the Alpine Club, read, enjoyed, studied in detail and then acted upon. Hopefully the activists among you will be further inspired to root out some of the many unclimbed lines that remain in the Highlands. These lines have revitalised my climbing life. I hope they do the same for you.

Duncan Tunstall

Ben Nevis: Britain's Highest Mountain

Ken Crocket & Simon Richardson

Scottish Mountaineering Trust, 2009, pp416, £27.50

A silver lining to this *AJ* running way behind its production schedule, is that it enables me to flag up one of the most desirable books to cross the editor's desk this year. Crocket and Richardson's update of SMT's 1986 history of 'The Ben' – also by Crocket – is simply superb. Besides the authors, much of the credit should go to Tom Prentice who designed and produced the book. For anyone who has climbed on the mountain, and for those that aspire to, there are simply hours of pleasure stored here, from Timothy Pont's 1585 sketch of 'Bin Nevesh' as part of the first topographical survey of Scotland to Andy Cave's first ascent of *Techno Wall* (V,6), wrapping up the 2008 winter, and Dave MacLeod's extraordinary first ascent, the following July, of Echo Wall, extreme technical difficulty and minimal protection combining to form 'one of the most difficult rock

climbs in the world', according to the authors.

What strikes you from this edition is just how much climbing has advanced on the Ben over the last two decades. Seven chapters have been added covering new developments, all authored by Richardson who was a key player in the 'mixed revolution' he chronicles. Not only are the climbs themselves impressive, but the stories are told in such compelling style that a quick dip to check a point of history turns into an hour of rapt reading. A full review of this great book will appear in the next *AJ*, by which time this deserves to be among mountaineering publishing's best sellers. ***SG***

Climbers' Club Guidebook Centenary Journal
Edited by R F Allen
The Climbers' Club, 2009, pp304, £16.99

'...many who thought they knew Lliwedd fairly well will find a feast of...pleasures revealed to them by this little volume.'

Such was the verdict of the *Alpine Journal* in 1909 on Archer Thomson and Andrews's *The Climbs on Lliwedd*, the first-ever climbers' pocket guidebook. And much the same could be said of this latest offering from the Climbers' Club, celebrating a century of CC guidebooks, except that it is not a 'little' volume. The authors ably marshalled by Bob Allen cover a lot of ground, from the big cliff itself, through a veritable degree course in guidebook history, to musings on the idiosyncrasies of authors and how they have occasionally led us astray.

The book begins with a complete reprint of the 1909 guide, a work of 99 pages that set the concise style of route description, plus photographs and topos and lists that has been standard to climbing guidebooks ever since. Mike Bailey, in an informative essay on J M A Thomson and the advent of guidebooks, notes the early resistance of the Pen y Gwryd establishment to publishing route details, or even divulging them to passing visitors. Men like Oscar Eckenstein were, says Bailey, 'fiercely protective of the Corinthian spirit of the early days and anxious that the romantic side of exploration and discovery should not be compromised.'

Then along came rude commerce. The door to the *Lliwedd* guide and 100 years of definitive followers seems to have been pushed open by O G Jones and the Abraham brothers with *Rock Climbing in the English Lake District* and then, *sans* Jones, with the same for North Wales. These were hardly pocket guides and were laced with lively narrative, but they had let the climbing secret out of the bag. The CC responded.

The *Guidebook Centenary Journal* fits precisely that 'bedside...dip-into' mould and is confirmation once again that the essay is the perfect form for writing about climbing. Don't skip the reprint of the 1909 guide. It did not mark a complete swing away from the Romantics; take Andrews's part of the Introduction (the pair wrote a section each) as he sets the scene, approaching by Llyn Llydaw: 'A short walk along its banks, and an ascent of the screes which lie at the foot of the grim walls of Lliwedd, carry us to a

world which has caught no note of modern storm or stress.' So they felt the need of such resort even then?

There are plenty of familiar names here from CC circles – Harold Drasdo, Derek Walker, Tim Noble, Dave Gregory, Terry Gifford and more, all of them on form. And there are gems tucked away like Jill Sumner's 'glimpse or two' into the background of the mid-Wales guides written by her late husband John. There's the Sumners' first audience with Joe Brown while researching *Central Wales* – 'a bit like meeting the Godfather' – and a meeting with farmers, 'on neutral territory' by a lane in the Cywarch valley. Jill describes the farmers as having faces set 'with bottled umbrage'. Not only did they object to some of the crags having English names, they objected to English route names, with that of *Crucifix* causing particular offence to Methodist sensibilities. When, in a moment of mischief, Jill said they were thinking of naming a route *The Holy Grail* one man nearly lost his dentures. *Mid Wales* came out with *Crucifix* changed to *The Technician* and no *Holy Grail*. As was said at the beginning, this collection, rather like that first *Lliwedd* guide, contains a feast of pleasures. *Stephen Goodwin*

Mountain Words
British hill and crag literature: into the 21st century
Chris Harle and Graham Wilson
Millrace, 2009, pp184, £14.95

Another quirky, thought-provoking, beautifully produced little book from the Millrace stable is always full of surprises, but this one turns out to be a combination of a Neate-style list for the last 25 years and five essays on mountain literature by Graham Wilson. The complete list takes the same period as the duration of the Boardman Tasker Award, so there's a list of BT short-lists and winners too. To provocatively fill the gap backwards there is a list of 50 recommended books published before 1983. Finally a book search by category is born of Chris Harle's bookselling experience of vague enquiries in 'Outside' at Hathersage.

You have to pay attention to the parameters of the main list: 'British walking/climbing interest' omits *Touching the Void* (it's in the BT list) and includes Wainwright, fell-running and *The Book of the Bivvy* (a gem if you've not discovered it). For all bibliophiles this is going to be an indispensible and contentious book. Neate's best mountaineering book of all time, Whymper's *Scrambles*, does not make this 'best fifty' list. But nor does Leslie Stephen, both being of 'Alpine' rather 'British' interest. Members of this club might feel that there is something unsatisfactory about this. Of course, the same restrictions applied to Graham Wilson's previous Millrace book of essays on this subject, *A Rope of Writers: A look at mountaineering literature in Britain* (2006). Millrace prides itself on producing 'idiosyncratic' publications.

So what of the essays? The opening sentence cites *Scrambles* and *Touching the Void* as pinnacles of British mountaineering literature. No deviation

from the press's characteristic quality there then. And in their delightfully rambling way, these essays do address some tricky questions concerning 'Why so much writing about climbing?', 'What do words have over pictures?', 'How reliable are biographers?' 'Can walking literature make the grade?' and 'When is climbing fiction successful?' Along the way there are many instructive insights and incisive critiques of, among others, Andy Cave's *Learning to Breathe*, Dennis Gray's novel *Todhra*, Elizabeth Coxhead's *One Green Bottle* and M John Harrison's *Climbers*. Wilson is strong on telling comparisons: Sutton and Noyce's *Samson* with Jim Perrin's *Menlove*, Whillans and Ormerod's *Portrait of a Mountaineer* with Perrin's *The Villain* and Douglas Milner's photograph of 'Crack of Doom' with W H Murray's account of the climb in *Mountaineering in Scotland*.

What Wilson's admirable work indicates is the need for an inclusive and critical overview of mountaineering writing in English. It is amazing that we don't have one. Meanwhile *Mountain Words*, in its two halves, provides plenty to argue about and take back into re-reading this ongoing rich heritage in which the Boardman Tasker Award can now be seen to play a central role. *Terry Gifford*

Eighty Years on Top
The History of the Himalayan Club
A DVD written and produced for the Himalayan Club
by Karamjeet Singh, Ascent Films

'In a hundred ages of the Gods, I could not tell thee of the glories of the Himalaya.' So, with the words of the *Puranas* begins this film, which, nonetheless, does a pretty good job of covering those glories in 25 minutes.

Eighty Years on Top traces Himalayan history from the early wanderers of the high passes to the era of exploration and mountaineering. It includes rare footage from the HC's archives and records the Club's activities from the days of founders such as Younghusband and the Duke of Abruzzi. Early members such as Pandit Nain Singh, Shipton and Tilman are featured and there is footage of the exuberant Gurdial Singh doing his headstand on the summit of Trisul in 1951, plus some words by him today recalling the experience.

From recent times, and always against the background of the mountains, we see Chris Bonington, Harish Kapadia, Dr M S Gill and others, and the film concludes with the Nanda Devi Sanctuary and some excellent words on the future by current HC president, Suman Dubey.

Eighty Years on Top was premiered recently in the presence of Mrs Sonia Gandhi, leader of the Congress Party. It is a fascinating history, but more than that is the abiding impression of 'the glories of the Himalaya' that the film conveys with wonderful visual richness.

The DVD is available in the UK for £4 (£5 including postage) - from me at 18 Howitt Road, London NW3 4LL or from India, details on **www.himalayanclub.org** *Martin Scott*