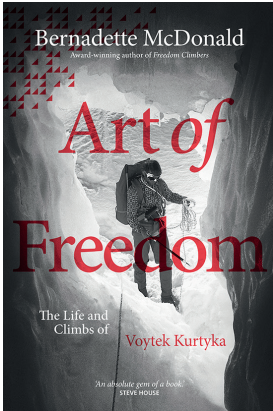

Reviews



2nd Lt N S Done (1881-1917), Royal Fusiliers,
killed at the Somme, one of 70,000 men with no known burial place
whose names are recorded at the Thiepval Memorial.

Reviews



Art of Freedom

The Life and Climbs of Voytek Kurtyka

Bernadette McDonald

Vertebrate Publishing, 2017, pp247, £14.95

The Polish mountaineer Voytek Kurtyka never breached the wall of wide public acclaim that many mountaineers have enjoyed, even though few, if any, have equalled his phenomenal record. He resisted celebrity and his letters to the committee seeking to award him the Piolet d'Or, recognition for his life's work of bold and innovative climbs, became increasingly but politely terse. He argued that media pressure to create a number one star meant the deg-

radation of climbing. Would they publicly award a hermit for years of spiritual practice? According to his declared view of the world, climbing is art, advertising poison and self-advertising the oldest disease of the human soul.

So spoke the man who treated the stupendous west face of Gasherbrum IV to its first ascent in exemplary style, made a complete and sensational traverse of Broad Peak as well as so-called 'night naked' speed climbs up Cho Oyu and Shishapangma, each of them staggering achievements. Kurtyka's life and philosophy are now brilliantly and sensitively described in *Art of Freedom*, a biography by Bernadette McDonald tracing Kurtyka's development from a young, slightly built but ferociously strong rock addict known as 'the animal', to an Alpine and Himalayan climber of the highest distinction.

Born in 1947, the first son of a well-known author, he studied electronics at university but quickly forgot most of what he had learned as he concentrated on climbing. Poland had survived the Nazi regime and endured the onslaught of communism; mountains were an escape. Kurtyka was among the first climbers to develop fast ascents. It was essential to climb quickly because their 'gulag' quality clothing and poor equipment allowed no time to linger. Only speed ensured survival. Even so Polish climbers earned a formidable international reputation when Kurtyka and four others spent 13 days on the first winter ascent of Europe's tallest cliff, the 1,100m Trollveggen Wall in Norway, made even more daunting by rock so overhanging the climbers spent long periods in mid air jumaring or rappelling in the dark on poor-quality Polish ropes put under heavy stress.

Kurtyka and his regular partners reached the highest levels of mountaineering long before the Polish mountaineering establishment grudgingly acknowledged their success and officially accredited them as mountaineers.

'What fun!' was Kurtyka's reaction to their reluctance. He was born to question and to rebel against life in a totalitarian regime that expected him to report his fellow mountaineers should they criticise the system. Experience taught him how to bend and manipulate rules. Rules, regulation and the approved way of doing things were anathema to him, as was his father's strong Christian belief. Freedom, he demonstrated, was indeed an art although he was benevolent towards those who felt it necessary to use aids such as bottled oxygen at altitude. 'Thou shalt not blame thy neighbour for using spectacles, condoms or oxygen,' he declared.

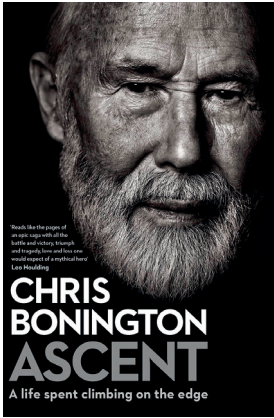
Bernadette McDonald's examination of Kurtyka's attitudes and relationships with his fellow mountaineers and her descriptions of the bold lines they forced up the highest summits are thorough and totally absorbing. Between 1970 and 2003 Kurtyka organised or took part in a total of 49 expeditions, mostly with Polish climbers. Although he realised that his ethos of lightweight style on difficult new routes meant failure was always a distinct possibility, he much preferred this approach as an alternative to siege tactics carrying heavy loads and fixing ropes up the mountain. Regardless of success or failure he declared that returning from each climbing adventure brought a new perspective on everyday life.

'The mountain worked like some giant broom that swept away all the junk, all the trivialities, all the burdens I took with me from my neurotic everyday life. I came back from the mountains an immaculate and clean person.' It was an almost mystical or spiritual experience for Kurtyka; it was his record of illegal ascents, his self-styled 'collection', which gave him greatest pleasure. 'Being illegal is part of a creative life. Restrictions are mostly applied by the brutes of this world and they turn our lives into slavery.'

In 1977, in the grip of cold war tensions, an international climbing exchange between Britain and Poland introduced Alex MacIntyre and John Porter to the east European climbing scene. Kurtyka helped them keep a low profile by introducing them as Porterwich and MacIntyreski. With Kurtyka they climbed a new route alpine style on the north-east face of Koh-i Bandaka (6812m), after cunningly substituting the name on the original permission for a more demanding option. The following year they forged another new route, again alpine style, on Changabang (6864m) in the Garhwal.

Kurtyka was still climbing hard well into his sixties, soloing some of the hardest rock routes Poland could offer. He can look back on an impeccable safety record. Apart from a few bruised knuckles and skinned fingers he emerged without injury. Despite a penchant for extremely difficult and dangerous climbs, he avoided accidents or tragedy; not only for himself but also for his partners. In his seventies he at last relented by acknowledging official recognition of an exceptional climbing career. In 2016 he agreed to accept the Piolet d'Or marking his lifetime of mountaineering achievement – but only on condition that all his close mountaineering friends joined him on the platform, which they did.

Ronald Faux



Ascent

A Life Spent Climbing on the Edge

Chris Bonington

Simon & Schuster, 2017, pp432, £20/£9.99

The front cover of the hardback edition of Chris Bonington's autobiography, *Ascent*, features a striking black and white headshot of the author. Commissioned by Simon & Schuster and taken by photographer Robert Wilson, it certainly belies Chris' 84 years. But what else might be hiding behind this enigmatic mask? Eyes slightly narrowed and close set, a family trait, lips lightly together, skin finely weathered, beard neatly trimmed and rendered a distinguished silvery grey rather white against the

dark backdrop; I found myself looking back at this portrait after almost every absorbing chapter – and wondering.

Death haunts climb after climb during Chris' storm years: John Harlin, Eiger Direct, Ian Clough, Annapurna south face, Tony Tighe, Everest south-west face 1972, Mick Burke, ditto 1975, Nick Estcourt, K2, Pete Boardman and Joe Tasker, Everest north-east ridge. All of course were enthusiastic participants in a high-stakes game. Nonetheless one finds oneself looking hard at the photo; does it betray guilt or regret, or perhaps just stoic acceptance?

We know from Chris' own words here of the strain his frequent and lengthy absences imposed on Wendy, whose loving forbearance verges on saintly. It was she who consoled the widows of her husband's adventures and was so often the single parent to two boys who resented their dad's disappearances, suffered at school from famous father syndrome and became wayward.

Ascent is, to an extent, confessional. But for all the admissions of obsession and selfishness, there is no suggestion from Chris that with hindsight he would have done anything differently, stayed at home more or lowered the risk threshold on expeditions. As for how he has survived when so many climbing friends have died: 'the answer must be plain luck.' For those of us – and surely we are the majority – already familiar with the Bonington oeuvre, the fascination of an autobiography is any insight it gives into the personality behind those blockbuster expedition narratives. It does not disappoint.

To say Chris was brought up in Hampstead, went to public school and later to the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst, smacks of privilege, and in it you imagine the makings of a bold adventurer, a leader of expeditions with columns of porters and pack animals. Yet this is a caricature. *Ascent* reveals a timid child, frightened of bullies and cricket balls, brought up in a dysfunctional, sometimes cash-strapped family, an absent father overly fond of booze (a sometime journalist, I note), Mum sectioned and hospitalised for 18 months. Chris cried on failing his English A-level, and cried again on failing as a pilot at RAF College, Cranwell.

Transferring to the army, Chris loved Sandhurst and ‘unconsciously’ tried to fit in with fellow cadets from top public schools, his own school having been comparatively minor, by adding a posh veneer to his north London accent. But he remained socially awkward; serving in the Royal Tank Regiment in Germany he was ‘too conscious of the pips on [his] shoulders’, too proud to take his veteran sergeant’s advice, yet also too shy to emulate his fellow subalterns in pursuing German girlfriends.

So thank goodness for climbing. Chris’s bubbling enthusiasm for rock seems to have remained undimmed from his love-at-first-sight taste of it as a teenager on the sandstone of Harrison’s Rocks near Tunbridge Wells. ‘I had discovered the passion that was to guide my life,’ he writes. More than sixty years later he was still ‘getting out,’ marking his entry to a ninth decade with one more ascent of the Old Man of Hoy, this time with a touch of tight rope from Leo Houlding.

Leo had suggested the climb shortly after the death of Wendy Bonington in July 2014. Chris had nursed her through two years of cruel decline with motor neurone disease. His grief was intense but climbing offered the possibility of relief, just as it had done in 1966 when Tom Patey invited him to make the first ascent of the Old Man following tragic death by drowning of Chris’ first son, Conrad, aged three. ‘I think [Tom’s] aim had been similar to Leo’s, to help me through my bewildering sense of loss.’

Ascent is dedicated to three women: Chris’ mother Helen – only recently, he confesses, has he come to appreciate how great was her love for him – Wendy, the epitome of ‘selfless love’, and his second wife, Loreto Herman, widow of his old friend Ian McNaught-Davis. Frequently the book reads like a tribute to Wendy, an expiation of the guilt he must have felt at so many goodbyes.

After the epic crawl down the Ogre in 1977, Chris with three broken ribs, pneumonia and a broken wrist, Doug Scott with both legs broken, he arrives home to Badger Hill in Cumbria 10 kilos lighter and barely able to walk more than a few hundred metres without a rest. He goes on: ‘For a while just being reunited with Wendy and the boys was enough but time was passing and I had an expedition to plan.’ And so to K2. Such single-mindedness. The drive of the man is formidable.

Chris’s last ‘real’ expedition was to Arganglas in 2001, but hot-rock trips continued well into his late seventies, notably annual sojourns with old friends new routing in the Anti-Atlas of Morocco. By then, of course, he was a knight of the realm, the public face of British mountaineering and also of a clutch of charities whose aims he believed in. He was president of Lepira, combating leprosy, for almost 30 years, a very active president of the Council for National Parks, and until recently chancellor of Lancaster University. Even now, as he jets around the world, any kind of carpet slipper retirement remains unlikely.

With more than 80 years of an incredibly active and varied life to pack into four hundred pages, *Ascent* of necessity has pace. Chris describes the effort of writing the book as ‘a challenging exercise of introspection’, which,

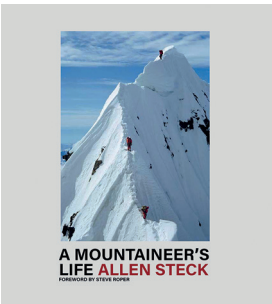


It's a dog's life. Chris Bonington and friend, featured in *The Climbers*, a collection of climbers' portraits from Jim Herrington, who brings a rock'n'roll eye to the world of rock and ice. (*Jim Herrington / Mountaineers Books*)

by his own earlier admission, is a condition that does not ordinarily detain him for long. The past has never much concerned him, he says. He has never kept scrapbooks of his career. 'Curiosity and enthusiasm are what drive me: the joy and pleasure of new paths.'

One of those new paths has been falling headlong in love with Loreto and getting married again. Thanks are due to her for helping ensure *Ascent* reached its publisher, supporting Chris through days of 'literary struggle' and applying the occasional kick up the backside whenever her mountain man had a tantrum with writer's block. Loreto's foot has hit its target to splendid effect. That cover photo, however, remains inscrutable.

Stephen Goodwin



A Mountaineer's Life

Allen Steck

Patagonia, 2017, pp256, £21.99

The old Silver Fox is a good sport, despite his naming me Fat Badger. On the day after the International Festival of Mountaineering Literature we would always take visitors out onto the gritstone, whatever the weather. When Steck questioned whether we always went out when there was actually snow on



Allen Steck, front left, in Pakistan. In 1976, Steck led a first ascent of Payu Peak above the Baltoro glacier but decided he wouldn't go to the summit as a gift to his Pakistani team. (*Mountaineers Books*)

the ground, Curran replied that it was a necessary Sheffield religious observance to climb every Sunday. We delighted in getting photos of this Californian climber brushing snow off the holds at Froggatt Edge. However, I also remember Jerry Lovatt bringing Steck to Stanage to fulfil his ambition to climb *Right Unconquerable* following a London AC lecture. The local welcoming party was gathered in the rain under the trees in the Plantation. We observed an umbrella slowly approaching uphill through the wet bracken. Upon close inspection we noticed that Steck had on his formerly polished, now quite sodden, city shoes. He'd no intention of being sandbagged this time. So he could only be impressed when Dick Turnbull, being characteristically so fired up to lead it, went ahead and led it in the rain to prove a point.

This is not an autobiography in the conventional sense. The book opens with a series of accounts of Allen Steck's most famous climbs in chronological order, after a summer in the Alps in 1949 in the company of a similarly young, inexperienced but equally ambitious Austrian, Karl Lugmayer, in which near catastrophes matched bicycling idylls between big climbs. Then follows the *Steck-Salathé* route on Yosemite's Sentinel Rock in 1950, an account concluded by the story of the 'astonishing hubris' of attempting the climb on the 50th anniversary of its first ascent when Steck's 75-year-old body lost all energy at the Narrows Chimney and he was benighted. Perhaps

the most remarkable story is that of the first, and still unrepeated, ascent of the Hummingbird Ridge of Mount Logan by a party of six over 37 days in 1965. Steck still produces for astonished guests the steel shovel that he perforated to take on this climb, the key to the famous Shovel Traverse of the narrowest part of the three and a half mile long corniced ridge.

The laconic, easy-going humour that makes this book such a delight is exemplified by the opening of the story of the third ascent of the Salathé Wall, when, gathered at the bottom of the climb, 'to our surprise, Long brought with him a Super 8 movie camera he had just bought. Now it seemed we were to make a film of the climb. We dutifully read the instructions for this machine by headlamp, eventually drifting off to sleep.' This amazing film languished for decades until Steck and Steve Roper made a voiceover commentary in Steck's kitchen, complete with popping cork for their second bottle of wine towards the end. It was first seen in the UK at the 2015 Kendal Mountain Festival. This would be the only opportunity for a UK audience to get a sense of the hilarious double act that Steck and Roper perform daily together over lunch in that kitchen.

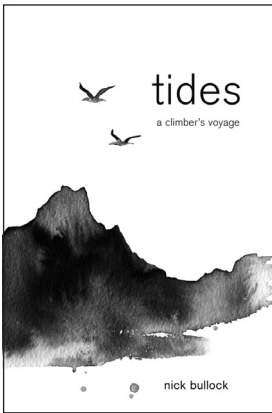
The book shifts gear into a section titled 'Childhood, Family and Business'. The briefest of biographical facts are often the most telling, especially when set against family photographs, and in this way Steck gets himself to the editing, with Roper, of the Sierra Club's mountaineering journal *Ascent* which set the bar for innovative climbing writing for a whole generation. Inevitably for a lifelong resident of the Bay Area, the Sierra Club played a crucial role in Steck's story, introducing him to climbing and then accepting Steck and Roper's proposal for an elegant, large-format, photo-essay-enhanced publication that the club supported for 25 years and 13 issues, helping launch the careers of writers like David Roberts and photographers like Glen Denny. Of course, those *Ascent* lunches eventually had their own wine label, chosen from a phrase in an Ed Drummond *Ascent* article. Thus was created Incubus Hills California Barefoot Burgundy.

In 1976, Steck led a first ascent of Payu Peak above the Baltoro glacier for the Alpine Club of Pakistan and decided that he would not go to the summit as a gift to his Pakistani team. (With amusing candour he admits that he changed his mind as he sat on a ledge below the summit and called for a rope, but it would not reach. 'Just as well.') His respect for different cultures and love of mountain travel led to Steck setting up a trekking company called Mountain Travel (USA), allowed to use this title by Col Jimmy Roberts who had pioneered trekking in Nepal under this name. Even after the ten years that he led this company, Steck continued to lead treks for them, especially to the Greek islands. One suspects that there are many stories untold about these journeys, but the book gathers pace in order to celebrate climbs at Joshua Tree and Jebel Rum, a lucky escape from being buried in an avalanche for 20 minutes and an epic walk through the Grand Canyon with his brother George who was writing guide books to his amazing journeys in the Canyon. Imagine planning a through-hike along the remote north side that would take 80 days and seven caches of food

and water. Such was George's enthusiasm, canyon experience and tenacity that they not only made it but remained the best of friends until the older brother's death. This capacity for easy-going friendship is one of the understated themes of the book, represented at the end by an affectionate portrait of John Salathé, a loner who was obviously not easy to get to know well. But Steck hangs in with him, finding the 82-year-old recluse in his camper van wintering out near the Mexico border, then ten years later visiting with Roper a nearby nursing home where the Swiss blacksmith recalls making his revolutionary hard steel pitons from Ford axles.

Amongst our literature's books of epics and suffering, agonies and anger, falls and fallings-out, Allen Steck's *A Mountaineer's Life* stands out for the warmth of its friendships, its sustained quiet humour, the joys and the beauties of a life not only fully lived, but clearly fully loved. Steck says that he and Roper were pleased that the first issue of *Ascent* 'demonstrated our desire for innovation and whimsy'. In today's hard edged, hard hitting literary climate these are undervalued qualities that are to be found beneath the veil of self-deprecation that the old Silver Fox weaves through *A Mountaineer's Life*.

Terry Gifford



Tides

A Climber's Voyage

Nick Bullock

Vertebrate Publishing, 2018, pp256, £24

It's 2015 and a newly released film, 'All Roads Lead to Scotland', is doing the rounds online. Nick Bullock and Tim Neill are featured, despatching *Feeding Frenzy* and *Han Solo* on Ben Nevis to the beat of a pounding guitar. 'That's a run-out, i'n't it?' Nick says at one point. 'Nutter,' I think, closing my laptop. 'Absolute nutter.' Satisfied that I had Nick correctly pegged as unhinged I swiftly put him from my mind. A year later and I encounter him again in front of a packed audience at the 2016 Kendal Mountain Festival. Laughing, joking, scratching his head and generally looking manic he is compering an event on Scottish winter climbing with a winning combination of morbid humour and enthusiasm. The lecture hall pulses. Having survived a bear attack in Canada alongside Greg Boswell the year before, his conscious self-deprecation in the face of eye-watering danger reinforces my impression of a one-dimensional eccentric. Useful for selling jackets and entertaining audiences, I reason, but leaving the auditorium I again put Nick to one side.

How wrong could I be? My no-fixed-abode caricature of a certified maniac who thinks little and laughs a lot imploded reading *Tides*: so much so that I swiftly acquired *Echoes*, Nick's 2012 book, soon afterwards. Moving from UK rock and winter climbing, to the Alps, South America and the

Himalaya, *Tides* is a deeply meditative book in which climbs take on significance not simply for their difficulty, but for the questions they raise when Bullock is back in the valley. The writing is restless, constantly interrogating the validity of his motivation, his place in society, and his relationships with friends, family and partners.

Early on, the writing moves impressively between climbs, people, emotions and memories with a pace that leaves the reader immersed in Nick's disorientation. Some might argue that bolder editing could have made the collection clearer, yet I personally consider such ambiguity a welcome challenge to much of our modern climbing discourse. Here is not a glossily packaged sponsored athlete, but an intelligent and refreshingly uncertain human portrayal of what it is like to give one's life to climbing.

The strain on Bullock and the pressure he places on himself and those around him are all too real. Insecurities about his ability and comparisons to the likes of Matt Helliker and Jules Cartwright are not shied away from, and translate to a very real internal anxiety and desire to push ever further. This journey, mirrored against that of his parents selling up and retiring to a touring nomad lifestyle on board a canal boat, gives a poignant honesty to the book's ruminations on death, commercialism and what it might mean to be fulfilled in modern society.

Written in a poetic style that to me had echoes of Ed Drummond's essay 'Mirror Mirror', Nick's opening climbs often lack a moment of conclusion or resolution. The *Supercouloir* and Chacaraju's east face are two examples, but even success on the likes of *Omega*, the ED3 on the Petites Jorasses and a notable British first, consciously cuts short so the moment of euphoria is left hanging incomplete in the mind. Summits hold little importance to Nick, and make this a challenging book to read, not just because of deaths of Jules Cartwright and Nick's own mother, but because no matter what the success, the only thing it appears to lead to is further personal uncertainty.

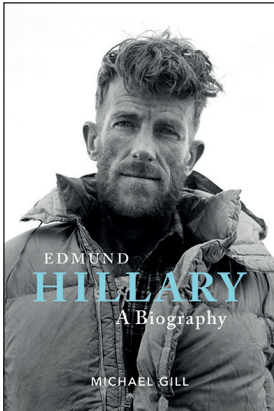
These are not, however, the disingenuous musings of a self-absorbed mountaineer looking for Instagram followers, but questions posed with absolute sincerity that reach to the heart of what it means to be human in modern society. Painfully personal memories from his childhood are set against the difficulties faced by his own aging parents and this makes for a wide-ranging book. Teenage angst, wilful youth, mid-life uncertainty, and old age come under scrutiny; one perhaps wonders whether Nick's mental restlessness is because he can never retreat from this intensely critical perspective.

In this context, scenes of running over Tryfan and the Glyder plateau in 2008 mark a notable switch in tone; we begin to see a more relaxed individual. A near epic with Nico Favresse on Dinas Cromlech's *Nightmayer* during the BMC International Meet is told with Bullock's familiar morbid humour but his perspective is broader and more light-hearted, a poignant contrast to the book's earlier mood. On a successful third attempt of *Surgical Lust*, a bold E7 on Scimitar Ridge in the Llanberis Pass, Nick sits at the top feeling that he almost understands this new life. Almost. Because if this

collection makes one thing apparent, it's that Nick is never truly fulfilled.

I wonder how I failed to appreciate this complexity in Nick before I read *Tides*. Perhaps I had been guilty of judging him by his vividly exuberant cover. Or perhaps it is because today's climbing media is defined by increasingly reductive narratives that it is difficult for us to appreciate that our relationship with climbing is rarely simple, often contradictory and likely to be fraught. Either way there is a boldness to *Tides* that deliberately attempts to break from this reductive trend and challenge such conformity. It is still be the fast-paced account of the man I saw on stage in Kendal, where drama plays out on blank rock faces and at extreme altitudes, yet *Tides* is also the questioning and discursive memoir of a thoughtful and candid mountaineer. I happily stand corrected.

Jonny Dry



Edmund Hillary

A Biography

Michael Gill

Vertebrate Publishing, 2019, pp532, £24

Michael Gill modestly subtitles his book 'A biography' rather than 'The biography', but make no mistake: this is a heavyweight tome, which aims to give a comprehensive account of Hillary's life, before and after Everest. It's a fascinating piece of work, both for readers who know Hillary well and for those who are new to his story. Currently there only seem to be imported hardbacks available but its New Zealand publishers, Potton and Burton, have done a beautiful

job, printing it on high quality paper and filling the book with both black and white and colour photographs. It might look like an archetypal 'doorstop' but in fact it's a surprisingly fast read, written with pace, honesty and humour.

When it comes to telling Hillary's story there are already several other books in print. Ed wrote two full-length autobiographies, *Nothing Venture* and *View from the Summit*, as well as several other books detailing his adventures on Everest and elsewhere. Over the years there have been several unauthorised biographies and most recently, the New Zealand biographer Alexa Johnson published a lavishly illustrated coffee table biography. Where Michael Gill scores however is in his access to Hillary's letters and personal documents as well as his long friendship with New Zealand's most famous son.

Gill first got to know Hillary in the early 1960s when he was a young student 'working towards an unrecognised degree in mountaineering.' Hillary invited him to take part in the Silver Hut expedition in 1960-1, a scientific and sporting expedition to Khumbu, which aimed to combine a rigorous study of high-altitude physiology with a wild yeti chase and forays onto nearby mountains, including the first ascent of Ama Dablam. After that the two men stayed friends, with Gill becoming one of the founding members of the

Himalayan Trust. His biography breaks down into roughly four sections: Hillary before Everest, the Everest story, life as a global adventurer, and Hillary's last two decades when he re-married and became an elder statesman.

One highlight of the first section is a chapter on his father Percy's First World War experiences, based on recently discovered diaries. Percy was a crucial figure in Hillary's life, a role model with whom he fought a running battle for much of his early years. Percy didn't talk about his wartime experiences, but the horrors of the Gallipoli campaign, turned him into a lifelong pacifist. Ed's work ethic and sense of social commitment can all be traced back to his father, as he readily acknowledged.

Gill's re-telling of the Everest story includes a three-chapter diversion into the history of pre-war Everest expeditions but becomes more pointed when he takes a swipe at what he calls Harriet Tuckey's 'revisionist' version of the 1953 Everest story, as recently told in her biography of her father Griffith Pugh. Gill queries Pugh's elevation into 'the man who made it possible', and declares that if anyone deserved that epithet, it was John Hunt, the expedition leader, a much maligned figure in Tuckey's book.

It's the chapters that deal with life after Everest that are the most interesting. The problem Ed Hillary faced was shared by all the great heroes of 20th century exploration: what do you do after the headlines stop? It wasn't always easy for him but Hillary's answer was a life of almost constant movement. As Gill emphasises he became the consummate professional adventurer, who as a writer, filmmaker and public speaker was very adept at telling and retelling his story.

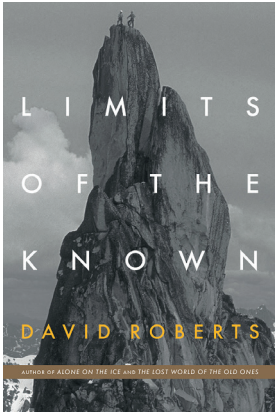
What set him apart, however, weren't his adventures in Antarctica or his epic river trips, but the long-term commitment he made to improve the lives of the people of Nepal. One of the most touching notes in Mike Gill's book is a simple letter from the village of Thame asking him to build them a school. 'Though our children have eyes,' they wrote, 'but still they are blind.'

Long before the concept of 'giving something back' became a cliché, Hillary and the volunteers he recruited built schools, hospitals and airstrips all over the Sherpa region and raised tens of thousands of dollars to further the cause. It was a chapter in Hillary's life that Gill dubs 'the best decade of Ed's life' and is all the more poignant when it ends in tragedy, with the death of his wife and daughter Belinda in an air crash in Kathmandu. The letters written by Ed and his family afterwards as they try to come to terms with the deaths are painful and raw; the fact they continued their work in Nepal in spite of what happened, a testament to their exceptional grit and dedication.

In his final years, Hillary got the diplomatic job that had been predicted for him since the 1950s, and settled into the role of an occasionally grumpy elder statesman.

Like all heroes, he had his flaws and weaknesses. Gill does not shy away from the difficult periods in Hillary's life but you cannot get to the end of this warm-hearted book without thinking: 'Boy, what a life.' What more could anyone want from a biographer?

Mick Conefrey



Limits of the Known

David Roberts

W W Norton, 2018, pp306, £18.99

David Roberts is seriously ill with throat cancer and so this is very much a valedictory book. When he started it he was so weak that he hired a researcher to visit libraries and conduct interviews for the ‘texts and testimonies’ that have always given authority to his writing. But for his 75th birthday in May 2018 he was sufficiently improved by radiation treatment to be able to hike in Cedar Mesa and share ‘Anasazi wonders’ with friends. His Facebook page reveals that he has even been teaching Alex Honnold to play golf. Of course, his book with Honnold, *Alone on the Wall*, was his most recent and Roberts’ fascination with Anasazi culture has been a major part of his later work. Some of us, of a certain generation, have been following his prolific writing career almost since the beginning with the Alaska narratives that established his reputation for gripping but elegant story-telling that was also well-researched and emotionally explorative. Superficially, *Limits of the Known* appears to revisit the themes and sometimes the subjects of his writing career, but Roberts’ intelligence and spirit of enquiry drives the book to do more than that and to circle back to his current challenges.

So this book is driven by a reassessment of the life of a freelance adventure writer. The initial question ‘Why have I spent my life trying to find the lost and unknown places of this world?’ is now followed by a more penetrating reflective inquiry: ‘What has my passion cost me in missed opportunities to connect with those who do not share my desire?’ This is really only addressed in the book’s self-examining last chapter where Roberts has become dependent upon his wife of 50 years, whose hand he desires to be holding in his final moments, ‘unwilling to let go.’ ‘It isn’t a journey,’ he snaps at one friend at his lowest point. ‘It’s an assault.’ Then immediately and typically, he half-justifies, half-regrets his correction. ‘In my pedantry, I was cruelly fending off my dear friend’s love.’ The implication is that journeys only unfold as stories in retrospect. At the time you are in it, it is something else that is more immediate, somewhere on a scale from urgent survival to ecstatic epiphany. It is only in the retrospective telling that meaning can be made of it. So Roberts searches for meanings in the adventurous stories of this book as a way of circling back into his own adventures, chosen and unchosen: ‘What have the passions of explorers across human history delivered to our understanding of life?’

In a chapter on Nansen’s *Farthest North* Roberts reveals that his father was an astronomer operating a telescope at the highest town in the United States. A combination of snow and an awareness of the expanding universe led the child to an interest in polar discovery and Himalayan expeditions. A chapter on Shipton concludes with Roberts meeting him in Alaska in 1966,

the gracious elder and the gawping young admirer. Then, in his early forties, Roberts 'gradually drifted into a fascination with the Anasazi' in south-eastern Utah: their canyon caves, petroglyphs and archaeology. Without realising it, this new passion came to replace climbing new routes. In a brilliant analysis Roberts reflects upon the difference between the two obsessions, pointing out that the discovery of new cultural sites led to wider questions about their mysteries. Drawn into writing assignments on first river descents, Roberts then tells the story of Leahy and Dwyer's first contact with unknown civilisations in a traverse of Papua New Guinea. Again, Roberts questions his interest in the long gone Anasazi as 'dilettantism' and admits that his mountaineer's need for control would preclude any immersion in another culture to really experience its beliefs and practices. Indeed, it is the exercise of control, in its purest form of complete isolation, which Roberts regrets as having been lost from modern forms of easy communication in adventure travel. It is caving, he points out, that has been least 'adulterated by the machinery of communication', and it is as a caver rather than a climber, he admits, that he would launch his career if he were starting now. Talking to the American cave diver and explorer Bill Stone, 'basking in the full force of the man's intense volition', Roberts realises that, 'This is the kind of brilliant zealot that Columbus must have seemed to his shipmates, or Shackleton to his comrades – a man to be feared but followed.'

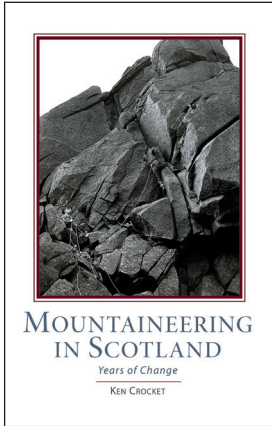
And this is the kind of insight, combining immediacy with historical depth, experience of human spirit with reflective distance that a valedictory book from a vastly experienced, questing and questioning writer can offer. In the final chapter David Roberts tries hard to turn the hardest questions upon himself, identifying his vocation as that of an adventurer above all. He is sceptical about this delivering self-knowledge, broadening the mind, or the value of personal joy, which 'for its own sake is a selfish thing.' He pulls back from psychic adventure, although psychotherapy has been 'an endeavour that led me to a better understanding of myself', more than exploration.

'But back to adventure,' he rather clumsily interjects at this point. His swerve is understandable, although it does perhaps avoid reflection upon one aspect of Roberts' career that should preoccupy his biographer. I remember Bob Bates telling me when I visited him just before his death that Roberts had probed him for possible lines of fracture in his partnership with Charlie Houston and left, finding none. Friends of Jeff Lowe in Utah still bristle at Roberts' prurient writing about Lowe's marriage and his relationship with Catherine Destivelle during Lowe's new route on the Eiger. It can be argued that searching out the truth has benefitted history, whatever the consequences for relationships, in work such as *True Summit: What Really Happened on the Legendary Ascent of Annapurna*. That there are still questions to be explored is perhaps something that an adventure writer would want to leave behind.

This absorbing and unsentimental final book, if that is what it becomes, will take fans of Roberts' writing beyond what has gone before in ways that will tell them more about its writer and his quest than any previous book.

'As much as anything, I started climbing because I was bored,' Roberts admits, seeking adventure as a boy away from comfortable security. This book is an intellectual, historical and personal journey into what followed, told by the freelance adventure writer who set the standard for a generation.

Terry Gifford



Mountaineering in Scotland

Years of Change

Ken Crocket

Scottish Mountaineering Trust, 2017, pp371, £25

Ken Crocket is a past president of the Scottish Mountaineering Club, was editor of the SMC journal for over a decade and has written an authoritative history of Ben Nevis. In 2015 he published a history of the early period of Scottish mountaineering from the late 19th century up to the First World War. The present volume covers the period from 1914 until the early 1970s, when winter ice climbing changed dramatically with the introduction of curved picks.

Crocket has done a phenomenal amount of research and covers the history in considerable, if not exhausting, detail. Readers unfamiliar with Scottish climbs may find themselves overwhelmed; almost every significant new climb done in a 60-year period is mentioned, with the full names and birth and death dates of the pioneers. The text is enlivened by extracts, often dramatic and well written, from the accounts of first ascensionists and there is a fine selection of historic black and white and colour photographs. In addition, Crocket sets the history in context with asides on progress in technical equipment, the development of mountain rescue, access and conservation issues, significant disasters such as the 1971 Cairngorms tragedy and the broader socioeconomic background, for example the effects of the depression in the 1930s. He is assiduous in giving modern grades for most of the climbs described, as well as original grades, with reference, of course, to the amount of aid used and the clothing, footwear and weather associated with the first ascent.

So far as climbing in the Cairngorms is concerned, Crocket acknowledges having borrowed freely from Greg Strange's masterly history, published in 2010. The latter is more comprehensive and has more historic photographs. The large overlap would, I suppose, be justified by the fact that Crocket embeds Cairngorm climbing history and the activities of its great protagonists like Brooker and Patey in the wider context of climbing all over Scotland.

There are brief portraits of all the famous names in Scottish climbing history: Bell, Nimlin, Macphee, Murray, Kellett, Cunningham, MacInnes, Marshall, Smith and many, many others. Evocative accounts of the first ascents of classics such as *Observatory Ridge*, *Mitre Ridge*, *Fluted Buttress* and *Minus One Buttress* add greatly to the reader's enjoyment.

Crocket has been at pains to follow up every trail he can, explaining for example the etymology of route names such as *The Bullroar* on Ben Nevis' Carn Dearg. His work is replete with amusing details: we learn that John Bernard Meldrum, who made an early ascent of the *West Buttress* in Coire Mhic Fhearchair on Beinn Eighe was a bachelor until the age of 90, then married and lived on to the age of 107. He recycles the story that Norrie Muir persuaded his GP to prescribe a pair of big boots for self-medication allowing him to continue climbing, while conceding that this may be an urban myth.

Despite many attractive features the book has not been well edited. There is a significant amount of repetition and the writing does not flow well, with the author too often allowing himself to lose the thread with his side-tracks; changes of topic are not signposted. As an illustration here is an extract from page 77.

Elsewhere new venues were being explored. Coire an Lochain, one of the three northern corries of Cairn Gorm, is the most popular modern climbing area in the Cairngorms, largely due to the ski road which greatly eases access. Central Crack Route (120m Moderate) was the first climb recorded here, by Alexander (Sandy) Harrison and Louis St Clair Bartholomew. The latter was a JMCS climber from Edinburgh and one of the Bartholomew family firm of cartographers which is credited with the introduction of hypsometric tints, or layer colouring on maps. This indicated low ground in shades of green, and higher ground in shades of brown, leading to still higher ground in purple then white. Leonardo da Vinci was probably the first to produce a map using a basic colour scheme to indicate high ground, with his map of central Italy in the early 16th century.

Louis St Clair Bartholomew appears not to have paid [sic] a very active role in the family firm, however, perhaps saving his energy for mountaineering.

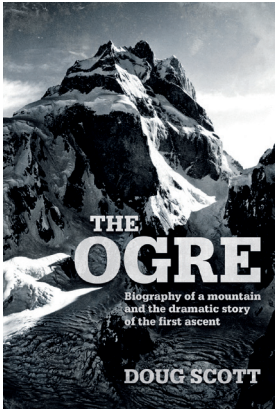
There are some surprising errors, for example the photo of Hamish MacInnes opposite page 249 is said to be on Rannoch Wall. One hesitates to disagree with Crocket, a past author of a Glen Coe climbing guide, but the author of the latest guide in preparation pointed out to me that it looks far more like the east face of Gearr Aonach. The photo of Dougal Haston is wrongly dated as July 1977, six months after Haston's death. I was pleased to see a print of a cartoon of Dougie Dinwoodie by Norman Keir, a talented Aberdeen climber who produced some excellent magazines in the 1970s; but there is no reference to this illustration within the text, and as it dates from the late 1970s, it does not really belong in the time period to which the book is ostensibly devoted, indeed it is strangely placed next to a set of photos of wartime ascents in Arran.

There is no list or index of illustrations. There are two somewhat unattractive maps in an appendix, one of which was far better presented as a full colour endpaper in Strange's Cairngorms history. Some aspects of the book design are unappealing, particularly the ugly tables, which appear to have been copied straight from a Word document. The page headers for

Chapter 14 have Corriemulzie misspelt, and for Chapter Seven 'The War Years' are given as 1910-1944.

Negative comments notwithstanding I feel that Crocket deserves our gratitude and praise for his long labours. Like most 'official' histories it is perhaps best consumed in small portions rather than all devoured at once. As a source book it is unlikely to be outdone. Anyone who loves Scottish climbing will derive great pleasure and learn much fascinating information from dipping into it.

Geoff Cohen



The Ogre

The Biography of a Mountain and the Dramatic Story of the First Ascent

Doug Scott

Vertebrate Publishing, 2017, 178pp, £20

When I was young expedition books were all the rage. There were still a few gaps on those maps of the Greater Ranges that were then available, and every expedition seemed obliged to produce a book upon its return. Most differed only in the names of the members and the name of the objective: most narratives were all but interchangeable. Irrespective of whether or not a summit was reached – and give

or take the odd accident – armchair readers could enjoy a whiff of an exotic adventure that was quite beyond their own reach.

In due course expeditions became two-a-penny. So-called mountain adventure, even a billet on an 8,000m peak, is available for purchase to every Tom, Dick or Harriet. The question is, can they write? It takes an epic happening, a talented writer or an unusual treatment to make an expedition book of more than passing interest to those of us who actually climb mountains ourselves.

On the face of it this book is what it says on the tin: yet another expedition book. However, it's not a run of the mill story and its author is a real, highly respected mountaineer with a worthwhile tale to tell. It's historical, in as much as the expedition it recounts took place over 40 years ago, yet three of the four dramatis personae are still around, aged but active. And although at the time the bare facts of the expedition were reported in the *Alpine Journal* and distorted and dramatized in the tabloid press, the full gripping story has never before been recounted in depth, move by move.

The treatment too is unusual for the book is divided into two distinct parts: the context and the adventure. Part One opens with a discourse on Karakoram geology and geography followed by what can, in the space available, be only a précis of the history and exploration of the region, spanning from Darius the Persian and Alexander to Moorcroft, Godwin-Austen, the Great Game, Conway, Tilman and Shipton. Apparently it was Conway who

during his 1892 expedition, first remarked on 'Point 23,914' (now Pt 7285m) and dubbed it the Ogre, despite some confusion as to which mountain was what. For the armchair reader Part One should prove a useful, scene-setting backdrop to the adventure described in Part Two, which Doug Scott recounts in the first person, aided by access to the diaries of his colleagues.

It is not for me to retell his story here; suffice to say that Scott and Bonington, who happened to be professional climbers, reached the summit of the Ogre successfully but were both badly injured on the descent, indeed Scott completely crippled. They were subsequently stormbound, still very high on their complicated descent route, together with their two very experienced but nevertheless amateur companions, Mo Anthoine and Clive Rowland. To whom they undoubtedly owe their survival.

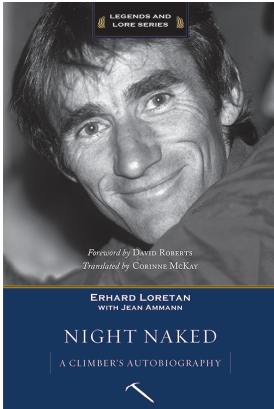
Writing in retrospect after all these years, Scott is not averse to sharing his feelings, doubtless still imprinted vividly on his mind. While obviously in great pain he is able to admire the view; he explains how while crawling on hands and knees each obstacle must be overcome one at a time. Never once does he appear sorry for himself, his concern is with the worsening frostbite of his mates. Unlikely though it seems to the reader, he never questions the prospects of survival.

I might well have skipped the initial two chapters, a standard 'expedition book' lead-in covering the approach march to Advanced Base Camp, and who did what, when and where. However, I was able to understand how the expedition had come together and appreciate why all was not necessarily sweetness and light among the original six expedition members. Although united in their desire to climb the Ogre, their climbing ethos ranged from single-minded to ambitious-but-laid-back, that is until the chips were down when the ethos became 'one for all and all for one'. Even then, marooned in their snow hole after five days of storm, one climber suddenly announced, 'We're going to make a fortune out of this'. Had Scott been a lesser man, both physically and mentally, it's unlikely that he'd have survived. While the same probably applied to his companions, it was Anthoine and Rowland who averted a tragedy and are surely the heroes of the tale.

Still in a very bad way, Scott was treated at Askole by a couple of doctors from a passing American expedition who told me months later how impressed they had been, not only by his cheerful fortitude despite thirteen days of continuous pain, but especially by his selfless concern for the porters who so had carried him so gently 35 rugged miles down the Biafo glacier on a makeshift stretcher. Without local porters, expeditions in the Karakoram would be impossible, and after his Ogre experience and several subsequent expeditions, Scott was determined to honour the special debt he felt to the Balti folk of Askole. Learning that the village's 50% infant mortality had been traced to polluted water, he set about raising \$10,000 to lay a mile of deeply buried pipeline into the village from a fresh water spring, which alleviated the problem. This was the germ of the idea that has since become Community Action Nepal, the charity for mountain people of which Scott is the prime mover. All power to his elbow!

This book is an excellent read, although as the author admits, much of it was hurriedly dictated to a typist, so the flow can be a little bumpy. The book is nicely produced and well designed, despite Galen Rowell's aerial photograph being bisected at the crucial place by the spine. The protagonists' own colour photographs are well reproduced and usefully placed on the appropriate pages. Four annotated photographs of the Ogre enable the reader to follow most of the route, but by definition such photographs are foreshortened and can be initially confusing; diagrammatic artwork from a hypothetical viewpoint with height lines added would have been useful. But these are minor quibbles. *The Ogre* is a worthy addition to the mountaineering genre. For Mo Anthoine's own perspective on the incident, *Feeding the Rat* by Al Alvarez (Bloomsbury, 1988) is also recommended.

John Cleare



Night Naked

A Climber's Autobiography

Erhard Loretan, with Jean Ammann

Mountaineers Books, 2016, pp256, £16.95

On 28 April 2011 the Swiss guide and Alpine Club honorary member Erhard Loretan fell to his death from a ridge on the Gross Grünhorn (4043m) in the Bernese Alps. The accident was prosaic: a crampon slip by his client and girlfriend Xenia Minder on an easy route and perhaps the most audacious high altitude climber of the 1980s and 1990s was dead on his 52nd birthday. As Jean Ammann, Loretan's collaborator on *Night Naked*, observes, it was an ordinary death for a mountain guide. 'Dying in the course of one's duties. The Grünhorn succeeded where 14 8,000ers had failed.' Ms Minder suffered a broken arm and scratches.

Six months earlier I'd had supper with Erhard in London following his participation in 'First on Everest', a fund-raiser at the Royal Geographical Society in aid of Community Action Nepal. Few were better qualified to speak at such an event. When Erhard and his fellow Swiss Jean Troillet reached their advance base camp at 5,850m on the Rongbuk glacier late on 30 August 1986 they had set a new record in extreme alpinism: to the summit of Everest (8848m) and back in only 43 hours, no sherpas, no rope, no bottled oxygen, for the last 1,000m they did not even take a rucksack.

The above I already knew of Erhard Loretan. This and the heart-wrenching fact that in 2003 he had received a four-month suspended prison sentence after pleading guilty to the negligent manslaughter, in December 2001, of his seven-month-old son Ewan. Erhard admitted to the police that he had shaken Ewan 'for a couple of seconds' to stop him crying. The case led to research showing many parents were unaware that infants, because of weak neck muscles, could die from being shaken for only a few seconds.

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Erhard had never been one to seek the limelight and after the tragedy he became, for several years, a virtual recluse. It is unlikely we would have this memoir before us now had not the original French language version, *Les 8000 Rugissants*, been published way back in 1996 when Loretan's star was riding high with the Swiss public.

This first English language edition takes as its title *Night Naked*, the graphic term coined by Voytek Kurtyka for the audacious, super-light, pushing on through the night style of alpinism employed by Loretan and his companions. Jean Ammann, a journalist for *La Liberté*, has brought the story up to date with a moving final chapter, 'Erhard *Humanum Est*', and David Roberts has supplied an insightful foreword.

To summarise *Night Naked* simply as Loretan's campaign to climb the 8,000ers would be to invite a yawn. But while, yes, we are taken sequentially through Erhard's extraordinary career, starting with the west ridge of the Dent de Broc near his home in Bulle (okay, not *so* extraordinary, until you learn that Erhard was only 11 years old at the time) to solo ventures in Antarctica, healing wounds, *Night Naked*, for the most part, bowls along with all the pace appropriate to the man along with candid opinions.

Reflecting on the death of Benoît Chamoux below the summit of Kangchenjunga in 1995, when both Loretan and the Frenchman were set on their last 8000er, Loretan suggests that if millions of radio listeners had not been following Chamoux's final stumbles maybe he would 'have listened to his body instead of his pride.' By now Loretan had become disillusioned, believing that the heroic era was over and mountaineering was entering the 'sad category of mass sports'.

In late 1994 he *Desnivel*: 'Urban hell, including all its problems, has migrated to the mountains. Mountaineering has lost its sense of ethics, and thereby its spiritual dimension.' Loretan and Jean Troillet had recently returned from Lhotse and witnessed the Everest base camp circus. '[We] laughed at these pseudo-mountaineers who have money but no skills. At the same time, this appalling spectacle made us feel tremendously sad.'

Loretan's gloomy tone here in the 1990s stands in contrast to the first two-thirds of *Night Naked* where he treats a storm of first ascents in the Andes and Himalaya, plus *enchaînements* in the Alps, more as some kind of cosmic joke. 'I never asked myself why I climbed, because I never asked myself why I lived.'

In 1983, along with Marcel Rüedi and Jean-Claude Sonnenwyl, Loretan became the first person to climb three 8,000ers on the same expedition (Gasherbrum II, Hidden Peak or Gasherbrum I, and Broad Peak) in only 15 days. Loretan was hooked. Eight-thousanders, he quips, are like salted peanuts: 'it's better never to start.' Yet there is a duality to Loretan. Just a few pages earlier comes a less jokey observation that perhaps better encapsulates Loretan's character: 'I was [alone] on top of Hidden Peak. To live happily, let us live hidden!'

David Roberts first read the book in the French original and thought it one of the finest memoirs ever written by a mountaineer, a high-wire

performance with Loretan's vision of life springing from a sense of the absurd invigorated all the same by a driving quest for joy and transcendence. Yet even before the awful event of December 2001 it seems there was a more insecure personality beneath the free-spirited exterior. Roberts was dumbfounded when a biography by the French climbing journalist Charlie Buffet, *Erhard Loretan: Une vie suspendue* (Éditions Guérin, 2013), revealed Erhard to be not the 'blithe absurdist' Roberts supposed, but someone who went to the mountains fretful and anxious. Troillet also described his friend as by instinct a private and retiring man.

Reading this memoir with the benefit of Roberts' foreword, Buffet's analysis and most particularly Jean Ammann's thoughtful commentaries between each chapter along with his 2013 postscript, the paradox is perhaps not so hard to grasp. Those words ('To live happily, let us live hidden!') become more than a throwaway line. Exuberant, visionary climber, yes, but Loretan was no less a complex human being. *Night Naked* is a fascinating story.

Stephen Goodwin



My Life in Climbing

Ueli Steck

Translated by Billi Bierling

Mountaineers Books, 2018, pp224, £16.95

Most books do not have the Sword of Damocles hanging over every page, but that is how I felt reading Ueli Steck's *My Life in Climbing*. Ueli's fate is known from the first page to the last, a fate he predicts at times in sad reflections that uncover layers of self-doubt and self-rebuke: concern that he is being driven by selfish vanity and the commercial image of himself as the indestructible 'Swiss Machine'. And then, elsewhere and in equal measure, he reassures himself

with the self-confident view that he holds the key to a long life, as he strives for ever-increasing levels of fitness through extreme training on trails, bikes and mountains, trusting that in speed he will find safety. A couple of decades ago, no one would have predicted that the north face of the Eiger would be used as a running track, but that is what it was for Ueli Steck.

The last time I saw Ueli was during the 2014 Kendal Mountain Festival. He was just arriving to register, looking smaller than I remembered and somewhat nervous, not at home with all the crowds. He was surprised when I addressed him out of the blue: 'Hello Ueli. Well done on Annapurna. You probably don't realise that Alex MacIntyre predicted your single-day ascent of the south face over 30 years ago? He shuffled slightly, and then gave me a smile of recognition as I explained what Alex had written back in 1982 for the *Karrimor Technical Journal*, predicting the coming of a future where individuals would be so fit and technically adept that new routes in a day on 8,000m peaks would be the norm for the very best.

My encounter with Ueli came a few months after he was awarded the Piolet d'Or, but also at a time when there was growing controversy over his claimed solo ascent. Could he really have done such a thing? Where was the evidence? The Sword of Damocles that hangs over this book is double-edged. It is not only that of his eventual fate, but one that could also destroy his legacy.

But why would he lie? His account in the chapter that deals with the Annapurna experience is vivid and plausible, yet there are some unexpected clues as to his mental state:

At this moment, I realized how much risk I was prepared to take, and how high I had already climbed up the face. It did not really matter now whether I carried on or turned back. I had accepted the risk. It occurred to me that I might not come back from the face. Suddenly there was no longer an afterward... no matter what happened I had accepted the situation.

Later in the same chapter, he answers the challenge regarding lack of evidence, the absence of photos, his GPS turned off, despite wearing it as part of his watch, the staggering rate of progress at high altitude, by saying he concentrated on the climbing with no thoughts of providing evidence afterward. Many other ascents have been believed with no evidence. Yet the writing also reveals an ill-tempered annoyance with mistakes made by both his partners and Ueli himself. He did not like or accept failure. There is little doubt that he was fit enough and technically able to make the solo ascent of Annapurna, but it is possible that he got into a mental paradox in which what was possible for him to achieve became for him what he wanted the world to believe was true.

The Annapurna experience cast a huge shadow over Ueli's last years. He was a half-broken man as the Swiss journalist Mario Casella reported:

Steck was doubly hit by this personal experience: he felt offended by the insinuations, but what really made him waver was the realisation that he had overcome the limits of his own mind. This point was revealed by Steck himself in a documentary on the post-Annapurna days. In a highly emotional sequence, the Swiss mountaineer explains with a choked voice: 'I think I found myself in the same condition of the first men who came back from the moon. Everyone commented on those missions in space. Common people, however, do not understand, they cannot understand. Astronauts were the only ones who could understand what they had experienced up there. They were the only ones to have lived that experience! And they became depressed afterwards... It's normal! No?'

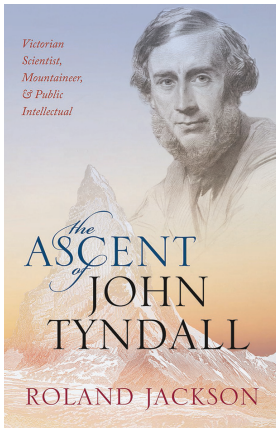
Whether he did or did not climb Annapurna, this book stands as a testament to everything that Steck did achieve. It is a remarkable diary of his climbs. I say diary rather than autobiography because there is little else in the book: about his childhood, loves and home. His life appears from this, as the title suggests, to exist almost entirely 'in climbing'.

To balance the dark moments experienced on Everest in the infamous encounter with a violent group of Sherpas, and the deaths of friends on Shishapangma in an ill-judged summit push, there are moments of joyful ebullience, especially during his solo crossing of all the 82 alpine 4,000ers when every climb, every meeting with friends, every cup of coffee is expressed vividly and joyfully, and puts the reader firmly in those moments.

The translation is not perfect, usually in technical areas, which sees Ueli placing or clipping bolts when we know pitons are meant. Sometimes the editing isn't clear. I had to read the detail of his Eiger speed ascents several times before I understood that he hadn't contradicted himself on the tactics he used to take back the record in 2015.

The Eiger chapter is the last in the book. Steck concludes: 'The most important thing was to stay aware of the risk at any given moment and control it. If I managed to do this, I would certainly be able to experience more exciting and beautiful moments in the mountains without killing myself.' Sad to say Ueli could not live by that maxim on Nuptse. Extreme solo climbing is no doubt the purest of all alpinism no matter what some may think about the risks. Steve House is absolutely right when he says in his afterword: 'Ueli Steck shaped the sport of climbing for the better by seeing what was humanly possible and then achieving it.'

John Porter



The Ascent of John Tyndall

Victorian Scientist, Mountaineer, and Public Intellectual

Roland Jackson

Oxford University Press, 2018, pp576, £25

John Tyndall (1820-93) was born in Ireland to a family of modest means but rose to be a revered scientist and thinker. He was involved in politics, the oil and gas safety board, the design of the organ at the Royal Albert Hall, lighthouse safety, and became a key figure at the Royal Institution, as well as being, eventually, married into the aristocracy: all this during the early days of the Alpine Club and some landmark ascents in the Alps. Science historian

Roland Jackson has boldly taken on the monumental task of sorting through the many volumes of Tyndall's writings: to give an idea of the scale, the Tyndall Correspondence Project has so far catalogued 7,500 letters, Tyndall himself authored 180 scientific papers, and the project is expecting to fill 18 volumes.

Tyndall began his career as a surveyor for the railroads in England and was hired in 1847 to teach at Queenwood College, where he was able to attend lectures on chemistry and botany and learned about discovery-based and child-centered learning. It was at Queenwood that he became aware

of Ralph Waldo Emerson's writings, which, along with those of Thomas Carlyle, influenced his work. Eventually, Tyndall began to teach physics at a time when laboratory science was largely absent from the British school system, something that Tyndall helped to remedy later. He debated his options of going to Germany to gain a doctorate or staying in England but ultimately pursued studies in Germany, where he developed his belief in the importance of molecular structure and his craft of experimental design and execution.

As Jackson writes: 'he must have found personal resonances in German ideas: aspects of idealism; ideas of consciousness and will; the importance of the individual; moral duty.' His thinking on science and theology was nuanced; he noted that society should be wary of 'making it the foundation of moral or religious convictions' and advocated for a fairer system for workers who are exploited but have little share of profit. Unfortunately, his suggested solution was to wait for 'noble-hearted men' in the upper classes to fix this. And so Tyndall largely pursued his own agenda, working constantly, summering in the Alps and not marrying until his fifties.

It was Tyndall's work that led to the discovery that Earth's atmosphere retained heat. He also established heat conduction in glaciers, worked on the structure of matter, promoted a scientific curriculum for schools and performed classic demonstrations of science: all of this ensured he was famous in his own time. He also disproved the theories of other scientists; it was for his dispute with James Forbes that I knew him. This controversy features throughout a great deal of this book and shows Tyndall's true character to be somewhat like Whymper in my imagination: a bit of a bore with great stamina for feuds. People began noting Tyndall's showmanship in some of his work. Thomas Archer Hirst, a friend of Tyndall, reprimanded him for a disagreement in print and Jackson points out that Hirst was 'concerned that success was going to Tyndall's head.' The dispute with Forbes, centring on who exactly should be credited for the various aspects involved in understanding the science of glaciers, proved so long-lived it outlasted Forbes by a considerable number of years.

Tyndall thought the blue of the sky was due to a scattering of very fine particles (our modern understanding is that it is a scattering of molecules in the atmosphere) and he argued this with George Airy who was forced to admit he didn't have a satisfactory explanation. As well as intriguing the scientific community, Tyndall could also thrill his audiences. He generated coloured clouds by the 'cooling effect of a sudden expansion of the vapour in a tube' and 'artificial blue skies that he created in his laboratory and the lecture room'. These 'were sensational.' Tyndall associated with literary worlds as well, as Jackson notes 'not only because of his advocacy of the need for creative imagination in science as in poetry but also because of the ethos he supported at the Royal Institution and those who spoke there.' If he was cast as a bore in later life, he was one that couldn't be ignored.

This book lacks the dynamic narrative that seems to have been his life. Perhaps it would have had a stronger heartbeat with more context. Tyndall

saw a great deal change. It was the time of railways, the Ordnance Survey, the rise of tourism. It's the time of John Muir, activism, war in Europe and America, workers' rights, the beginnings of feminism, and the rise of the British Empire, but we don't see too much of this amidst the minutiae of Tyndall's life. It's as if Tyndall is too interesting a character, involved in too much, writing too many letters and papers, to allow an engaging read. Just as Tyndall advocated for more imagination in science, I wanted more imagination from his biography. As Jackson says: he was a 'remarkable man, complex, often infuriating, and reflecting all the prejudices, tensions, and opportunities of his age.' But the book for a large part is lists: lists of friends he writes to or visits and the lectures he gives. In between there's lots of physics, which required some scientific background to understand. The combination felt heavy, even burdensome.

We do get glimpses of major events. On 23 June 1848, Tyndall left Paris only just missing the start of the June Days uprising, when the city revolted against the conservative turn of the Second Republic. Outside of Paris he hears 'rumours of 20,000 killed' and finds himself 'weeping with anxiety over the safety of Frankland, who was still in Paris.' But if Tyndall seems to be at every party and friend to all the major figures of the day, we hear too little of it. A surfeit of diary and letter extracts impedes the narrative's flow. We miss the impact of his discoveries: it would benefit the reader of how Tyndall's discoveries filter into the present, especially as one of his key discoveries is the greenhouse effect.

Jackson tackles Tyndall's racism and misogyny at various stages in the book. Tyndall wanted to overhaul the inadequate education system of the time but criticises women for their inferior intellect, which makes him not quite the force for good that he imagines himself to be, even if science education still carries traces of Tyndall's work. On receiving a request for a subscription from the editor of *Woman* magazine in 1872, he declined, judging 'the present movement as leading to mischievous results.' Tyndall doesn't stop there. He suggests 'the men of the day have become to some extent women' meaning a 'few of the women aspire to be men.'

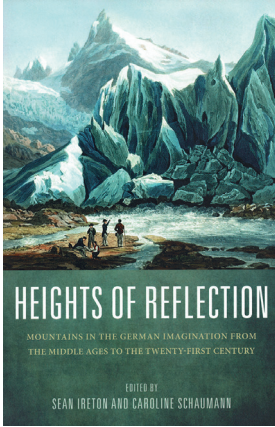
Tyndall, unlike contemporaries such as John Stuart Mill, was no advocate of women's emancipation. He was perplexed to find that women could indeed conduct scientific experiments, and even write books. He was a product of his society, not the force for change he thought he was. He used science to claim it was right and true to think this way. He held objectionable views on race: 'we do not hold an Englishman and a Jamaican negro to be convertible terms, nor do we think the cause of human liberty will be promoted by any attempt to make them so.' When the governor of Jamaica declared martial law to quell a rebellion and ordered the execution of innocent men, Tyndall joined Carlyle in the governor's defence. Thomas Huxley shared Tyndall's attitudes on gender and race, but took the side of the liberal John Stuart Mill, the only significant issue apart from the American Civil War on which Huxley and Tyndall ever differed. (Tyndall had Confederate sympathies).

Tyndall belonged to the great gentlemen's clubs of the day, which all restricted women of course. His friend Emily Peel joked after an abortive attempt on Mont Blanc 'when worthy of the distinction you must enroll me amongst your Alpine Clubbists, if such an honour is ever accorded to one of the weaker sex!' Jackson points out that the Alpine Club didn't allow women members until 1974 but then adds incorrectly: 'Unless one includes Tschingel, William Coolidge's canine companion, who was made an Honorary Member in 1869.' I doubt the Alpine Club Committee had that good a sense of humour. The enlightened did exist: the American Alpine Club (1902) and the Appalachian Mountain Club (1876) never restricted membership. But while there were some in the Alpine Club sympathetic to women alpinists, Tyndall certainly wasn't one of them.

Tyndall did some very significant climbs, such as the first solo of Monte Rosa, which Jackson tells us occurred in a rather unplanned way, with Tyndall 'waking before 6am [... thinking] the view from the summit [of Monte Rosa] must be unspeakably fine [... so] he set off [...] to make the first solo ascent.' It's this side of Tyndall that I admire the most, just doing something to see if he can. It's the experimenting side of him. Tyndall was ahead of his time in some respects. If he saw future disaster in guideless climbing becoming commonplace, he complained to Mary Egerton '[of the] small amount of originality developed by English climbers, Girdlestone is the only man who has shown anything of the kind [...] infinitely more creditable to him than hanging on to the skirts of a guide to whom you delegate the skill of scenting out the proper way, and the labour of leading, your own inventive powers being for the time perfectly torpid.'

This is a lengthy book about a remarkable man, unremarkable in its narrative. I need a biography to connect dots. I want a spider's web of the world with the subject at its centre, to make sense of their world. Tyndall was a well connected and remarkable man interested in just about everything, but Jackson's biography is simply a chronological plod through meetings, letters, dinners and discoveries, a lengthy, difficult book albeit a triumph of research and a testament to archives and the efforts to preserve them.

Nigel Buckley



Heights of Reflection

Mountains in the German Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Twenty-first Century

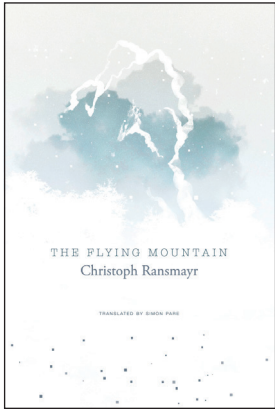
Edited by Sean Ireton and Caroline Schaumann
Camden House, 2017, pp406, £15.99

The Flying Mountain

Christoph Ransmayr

Translated by Simon Pare

Seagull Books, 2018, pp336, £18.99



Heights of Reflection is a collection of essays from European and North American academics on mountains in the German imagination from the Middle Ages to the 21st century. First published in 2012, it has stood the test of time and is now usefully available again for a sensible price. It starts, musically enough, with what is termed a 'Prelude', and a pleasing quotation from H W Tilman's 1946 book *When Men and Mountains Meet*. 'Like the desire for drink or drugs,' he wrote, 'the craving for mountains is not easily overcome, but a mountaineering debauch, such as six months in the Himalaya, is followed by no remorse.' Tilman's third book covered his disastrous pre-war expedition to Assam and other adventures, but much of its subject was his brave and exciting military service, including his time fighting behind enemy lines with Albanian partisans. Tilman had taken a dim view of Germany's mountaineering ethos on Nanga Parbat in the 1930s

but his judgement, you feel, could equally stand for his view of their military ethos too: 'They spent a lot of time and money and lost a lot of climbers and porters, through bad luck and more often through bad judgement.'

I don't wish to endorse Tilman's opinion *in toto*. The fact large numbers of climbers died on Nanga Parbat was not because they were German, more because they were German in the 1930s. The upwelling of nationalism as Germany emerged from the humiliation of Versailles only to run into the Great Depression readily explains the inane levels of risk-taking. British climbers were more risk-averse, but saw admirable qualities of virility and self-sacrifice in its campaigns on Everest. I used to laugh at the idea of Everest as a 'British' mountain and Nanga Parbat as a 'German' mountain, but in terms of critical theory, these terms seem rather apposite in the context of this book. The attempts to climb them reveal much about two cultures that once ran in parallel but then, as the nineteenth century wore on, diverged.

So how does the British mountain experience differ culturally to that of the Germans? Tilman's laconic explanation for his addiction is one answer.

Dan Hooley, the author of this excellent 'Prelude', a climber himself and professor of classics at the University of Missouri, offers the term *jouissance*, coined by the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. The term was a kind of retort to Freud's pleasure principle: that suffering has its place in self-fulfilment. One can take an educated guess at Tilman's reaction to that sort of psychological speculation: 'Any fool can be uncomfortable.' But Hooley strikes me as a man who can take an acerbic joke.

He also says, very shrewdly, that the book's subject, mountains in the German imagination, often a Romantic one, 'inform the mountaineer's pleasure but do not, as they are often said to do, explain it.' It reveals the deep cultural continuity that links Goethe to von Humboldt, the poet Ludwig Tieck, Richard Strauss and Thomas Mann, all of whom are the subject of essays included in the book. English Romanticism feels like a distant historical artefact compared to this. Notions of the sublime have collapsed into the sort of fuzzy sentimental glow that characterises much landscape photography, the type loved by tourist boards. Within mountaineering, the laconic irony of Tilman, doubtful of anything too philosophical, is what's endured: Mick Fowler is a good example of a modern exponent. In mainstream culture, humanity's encounter with the extremes of nature has been reduced to a pastiche of imperial explorers, a knowing wink that accompanies predictable stories fashioned to satisfy consumers and certainly not challenge their thinking: adventure as product.

These things are true in Germany too, but the blaze of German Romanticism lives on, judging by representations of mountains and mountaineering in contemporary German culture. Two recent German feature films, *Nordwand*, directed by Philipp Stölzl, and *Nanga Parbat*, directed by Joseph Vilsmaier, are ambitious attempts to explore the motivation and character of mountaineers, respectively Toni Kurz and the Messner brothers. (Angela Merkl was at the premiere of the latter, pictured alongside Reinhold Messner, which speaks volumes.) They both reject the supposed ideology of the post-First World War *Bergfilm* but draw on its aesthetic tropes. *Nordwand* is the more successful film, but the ambition of both directors is for serious, enquiring work, a contrast with the frothy mountain entertainments Hollywood puts out. It's hard to imagine an English equivalent to Werner Herzog, who has made ambitious mountaineering films: *Gasherbrum: Der leuchtende Berge* (1985) and *Cerro Torre: Schrei aus Stein* (1991). Herzog's work frequently draws on nature as a context in which to explore who we are precisely because he springs from the intellectual universe outlined in this book. In English, only Kevin Macdonald's 2003 *Touching the Void* has come close to engaging in the same way, and his antipathy to his subject gives that film a kind of alienating disinterest.

The English passion for the work of W G Sebald, a German writer working in East Anglia who would most probably have won the Nobel prize for literature had he lived, shows how galvanising this German tradition can be. (It pleases me immensely that the documentary filmmaker Grant Gee has made films about W G Sebald, the band Joy Division and Jim Perrin.)

Sebald is adored here partly I think because of his use of irony: so very English. Scott Denham's essay on Sebald in this collection touches on this and how Sebald drew on the work of Thomas Mann, who walks a similar line in *Der Zauberberg*, or *The Magic Mountain*. It's the sublime as a favourite ageing relative, loved, necessary even, but gently mocked. 'If Mann,' Denham argues, 'ironically questions the potential of mountain experiences to expand human understanding, then Sebald affirms that potential, but questions the potential of humans to live with the understanding of themselves that they have gained from the experience at the top of the mountain.' Perhaps the best we can hope for is a sequence of intense experiences to string as beads on a rosary, and then count them off, as the shadows lengthen.

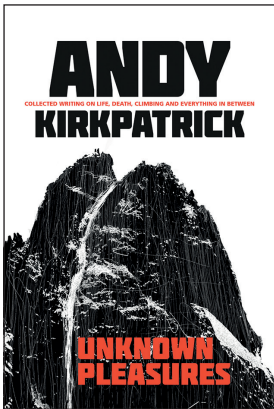
There is irony too in Christoph Ransmayr's critically acclaimed novel *Der fliegende Berg* (2006), now capably and sympathetically translated into English by Simon Pare as *The Flying Mountain* and long-listed for 2018's International Booker. It's a genre-defying work, sufficiently allegorical and oblique that you can read into it more or less whatever you like. Having read the essay by Olaf Berwald dedicated to it in *Heights of Reflection*, I wondered if we'd read the same book. It is the story of two brothers, Liam and Pádraic, with radically different philosophical responses to their shared upbringing by a loving mother who escapes their father, an Irish Republican dreaming of old grievances. After a long career at sea, Pádraic, the narrator, has come to live on a remote island with Liam, who has settled there after making money in digital geo-information. The island is a perch from which Liam is attempting to wrestle the complexities of the world into some semblance of order. Late on in the book, Pádraic remembers the gift they made their father for the first Christmas after their mother runs off to – horror! – Belfast: a papier-mâché topographical model of the valley where Michael Collins was ambushed and murdered. It's a metaphor for the whole book: lost men trying to orientate themselves in the world they think they inhabit.

The book opens with the brothers separated and Pádraic expiring high on the Tibetan peak of Phu-Ri, the eponymous flying mountain. Or at least, he believes himself to be dead, because soon his brother is bullying him awake, having found him unconscious in the snow. One thinks of Beck Weathers returning from the dead on Everest in 1996. (Olaf Berwald argues that Pádraic is in fact dead. Perhaps I'm being too literal-minded.) Then, as they continue their descent, Liam is swept away to his death in an avalanche and the rest of the book is an exploration of what it was that put them there. Thrown into the mix is Pádraic's passionate affair with a Tibetan nomad widow, whose presence deflects him from sharing his brother's determination. Her presence also allows Ransmayr to invoke Tibetan mythology, in which notions like flying mountains are readily accepted, on the basis that we shouldn't become too attached to the ground beneath our feet: it's not as solid as we might imagine. Nyema's love for Pádraic is arguably the truest thing in the book, but it still doesn't keep him on the ground.

The text appears as blank verse, although Ransmayr himself has spoken of 'flying lines' to go with his flying mountain. Some readers will find this

too unconventional, but it does add to the dream-like quality of the novel. Towards the end, after Liam's death, Pádraic says: 'I sometimes have the feeling / that I must wake from another / and then another dream / to arrive at last where I really am.' Perhaps it's not surprising that most alpinists don't leap into such philosophical rabbit holes. Most of us don't intellectualise what we do in this way. Except that we love mountains because, as Dan Hooley suggests, they 'persistently escape human efforts to chart or control them.' Of course, that isn't really true: you can dam a river or place a bolt and the spell is broken. But that's what we're looking for. The climbing scenes in *The Flying Mountain* may not convince the expert eye but the extreme psychological ground it covers will feel familiar to others who have been there and are prepared to think, and think deeply, about what it is they learned.

Ed Douglas



Unknown Pleasures

Collected Writing on Life, Death, Climbing and Everything in Between

Andy Kirkpatrick

Vertebrate Publishing, 2018, pp232, £24

For Andy Kirkpatrick writing is 'the urge to make a reality.' He explores many realities in this roller-coaster of a book, with their common denominator his unswerving fascination with himself. This has nothing of the congratulatory, of self-aggrandisement or hubris: instead it speaks of a constantly observing inner eye which pays attention to the smallest detail of his experiences and preoccupations

in order to 'see the vital importance of the seemingly unimportant.'

He discovered his love of and skill at drawing from an early age and this helped him make the stories that his severe dyslexia prevented him from writing. He took the trouble to study the intricacies of his subjects, the nuances of their shapes and angles and he kept looking: artist and fledgling writer together. Climbs of extreme and extended difficulty became 'frozen puzzles' to unlock, drawn on the rock for those who take the time to see and have the skill to interpret. That Kirkpatrick has those skills is beyond doubt.

The long-delayed decision to test for dyslexia was finally made when he was sixteen and his papers produced a near-perfect score on the spatial test, eliciting a comment from the examiner that the best choice of career would be one that involved three-dimensional problem solving and creativity. Little wonder then, that where others might find fear or self-doubt on seemingly impossible rock or ice, he sees pattern and possibility. His accounts of Scottish winter climbing, Yosemite ascents, struggles on the Dru and extended travails on the Troll Wall all bear this out.

He is adept at vivid descriptions, which place the hapless reader in these

hostile environments: the Troll Wall is 'a brutalism set in stone.' His descriptive skills illuminate the book as a whole; he has learned to view writing, too, as a pattern which can be deconstructed and manipulated, beginning with the recounting of his social security days living on £24 a week amongst 'people who were spread as thin as they can be on their small slice of life.' He injects humour to leaven the grim realities of this life on the wrong side of government benevolence, especially when he offers a snapshot of his brief career as a Happy Shopper Cheddar thief.

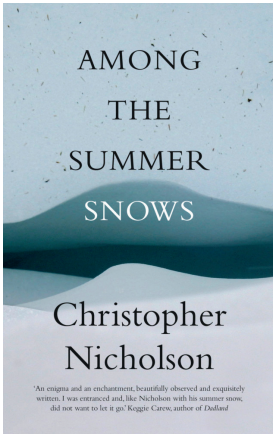
The surreal has its place, too, as he takes a female celebrity presenter who has never climbed before up Moonlight Buttress in Zion National Park. Whilst the climbing element of the undertaking was difficult enough for his newly recruited partner, it was the lack of an indoor toilet on the wall that generated most anxiety for her. Kirkpatrick's account of teaching her the techniques of relieving oneself on a high, vertical wall are both cinematic and unflinching.

Unknown Pleasures encompasses far more than climbing experiences: Kirkpatrick's focus is wide-ranging and keen and his honesty is unswerving. This is particularly apparent when he writes about personal relationships. There is a confessional feel to his prose. His thoughts, 'a little raw, a bit edgy, car-crash uncomfortable', mine their way into his subject, think on their feet and the overspill of feeling carries the reader along. There's pride in his family, too; when his 13-year-old daughter climbs El Cap with him his joy in her achievement is matched by his admiration at her modesty.

His later essays step confidently into wider arenas, including political controversy: his piece on the SS massacre of the inhabitants of the village of Oradour-sur-Glane in WW2 is fuelled by a quiet anger and the grim satisfaction that the only child to survive the atrocity was a boy who disobeyed the soldiers' orders because he knew that Germans were bad and would hurt them all. This narrowing of focus, a spotlight on the exceptional, resonates throughout Kirkpatrick's work. The essay 'Everest Sucking on the Barrel' punches fast and hard, a short diatribe the pounds furiously along the well-worn path of climbing deaths on the mountain. Kirkpatrick wonders why there are not more when 'you consider the ratio between fuck-off scary mountain and clueless out-of-their-depth tourist.'

This is a beautifully bound edition on good-quality paper enlivened by Kirkpatrick's monochrome line drawings. All credit to Vertebrate Publishing for having it produced in the UK. This sort of quality is, of course, reflected in the price but it's a book well worth having on every level.

Val Johnson



Among the Summer Snows

Christopher Nicholson

September Publishing, 2017, pp170, £14.99

A good writer should be able to make anything interesting, even lingering summer snow patches in the Highlands. But for the length of a whole book? Well, if it is then short-listed for the Boardman Tasker Award perhaps this is confirmation that it not only holds the reader but also offers a special sparkle in the prose. Holding the reader is achieved by structuring this book as a kind of detective's journey (from Kent!) for clues that lead to further clues around the Highlands's highest corries in August. But this is also a journey of 'a complication of thoughts and

feelings': 'Within this complication, among much else – curiosity, admiration, melancholy, elation – is uncertainty ... It's the lateness of the snow, the rareness of the snow, the improbability of the snow, that draw me up to the Highlands.' And already here's the sparkle of the prose, those emotional modulations that qualify uncertainty, and the rhythm of repetition that covets obsession in that last sentence.

Partly because the author is regularly questioning the absurdity of his obsession and partly because of the sheer physical demands involved as he increasingly comes to feel his age, the reader is drawn into the roller coaster ride of Christopher Nicholson's in-the-moment emotions and lone walker's wandering mind: 'I even had a snow-related thought: that ice was water pretending to be a rock. No, ice was water trying to be a rock. Trying and failing, but trying. As humans yearn to escape gravity and fly like birds, do rocks ever yearn for the fluidity of water?' Then a Burns love poem comes to mind with the line 'Till ... the rocks melt wi' the sun'. Literary memories like this are so lightly handled that they are accepted naturally as part of the rich cargo carried and informing Nicholson's quest that is really a journey into himself, alone since his wife died we are told, almost incidentally, at the beginning of the book. It is telling that the photographs, a surprisingly effective part of the book, are not captioned. This is far from a scientific survey. It's a personal quest to express the last unmelting, improbable, resilient and ridiculous reasons why we love being in mountains.

Terry Gifford



The Magician's Glass

Ed Douglas

Vertebrate Publishing, 2017, pp192, £14.95

In these eight essays on climbing and the mountain life, Douglas goes on a quest to track down and reveal individual climbers behind their more public or popular persona. Not only does he examine and tease out their deeper motivations through detailed research, he explores their enduring impact on others, both during their lives and for many, after their deaths. The temptation when reading a collection such as this is to search for common threads, to understand the author's choice in assembling these particu-

lar eight essays. In this book the reader is presented with a conundrum. Certainly words such as ego, pride, freedom, spirituality, risk, commitment, love, loss and death appear frequently, but to paint all personalities with the same brush is both reductive and inaccurate. Maybe one common thread is that all these men had a need for the mountains more than a need for people? But that too is reductive and misses the point. What is clear is that their lives were (or are) not all that they might first appear and Douglas casts a shaft of light onto figures that, even with his revelations, remain intriguing.

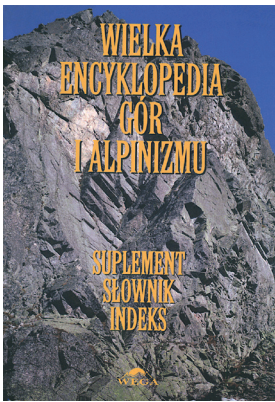
The anthology starts with the story of Nick Colton and Tim Leach on Annapurna III; it is one of impressive commitment and bravery, and ultimately failure. It serves to justify the title of the book, reflecting on how these two individuals differently recall their shared experience. Not only were their lives affected, their views on climbing and its inherent risks were forever altered. With this essay, Douglas introduces the notion of climbing as an art form. He ends the book with an essay on Andy Parkin who has literally made climbing into an art form with his paintings and sculptures. Parkin himself makes reference to the likes of Joe Brown, Johnny Dawes and Ben Moon who have the ability to see and climb the rock in a way similar to that in which a sculptor creates his work of art. The stories in between allude to climbing as something much more than a sport or even a compulsion, often a deeper spiritual pilgrimage, as subject to interpretation and criticism as art itself.

Stories of Tomaz Humar, Patrick Edlinger and Ueli Steck, and even the more happy-go-lucky Kurt Albert, are of men passionate and driven in their climbing and in achieving success. They are compelling to their associates, godlike to admiring climbers, yet vulnerable to the demands of notoriety and the more pedestrian needs that infiltrate all our lives. The essay 'Stealing Toni Egger' is an attempt to reclaim the achievements of a young man whose life and death, purportedly on Cerro Torre, has been overshadowed by the stories surrounding his climbing partner, Cesare Maestri. A particularly sensitive interview with Egger's sister both elevates the memory of Toni and remembers him as a beloved and sorely missed brother.

All five died young: three in the mountains, one in a fall from a via ferrata, and one at home, each leaving a legacy of mystery alongside their impressive climbs. How, I wonder, would a verse in McGough's poem 'Let Me Die a Youngman's Death' read for mountaineers? 'Let me die a youngman's death / not a free from sin tiptoe in / candle wax and waning death / not a curtains drawn by angels borne / 'what a nice way to go' death.'

The Magician's Glass was shortlisted for the Boardman Tasker Award in 2017. There is no doubt that Douglas has a way with words, and his ability to delve rigorously and insightfully into the inner lives of climbers and the mountaineering world sets his writing at the pinnacle of mountain literature.

Adele Long



Wielka Encyklopedia Gór i Alpinizmu

Compiled and edited by Jan and
Małgorzata Kiełkowski

Stapis, 2003-2017, 620zł/£127, seven volumes, pp5402

In the last three or four decades, several studious mountaineers have endeavoured to produce encyclopaedic works that cover both the entire mountain world and its connection to world mountaineering. Usually, this vast scale of information has been compressed into a single, rich volume. Outstanding in this respect, to mention one, was Edward Pyatt's *Guinness Book of Mountains and Mountaineering* (1980). But the vast scope of this subject clearly needed to be treated

in several volumes. In 1975, the Italian publishing house De Agostini launched its eight-volume *Grande Enciclopedia Illustrata della Montagna*. In 2003, updating and greatly enlarging the Italian work, a Polish couple, Jan and Małgorzata Kiełkowski, began to publish in Polish their *Wielka Encyklopedia Gór i Alpinizmu* (Great Encyclopaedia of Mountains and Mountaineering). With its seventh and final volume now on the market, this Polish collection, the most ambitious accumulation of information about the topic ever known, reached its completion.

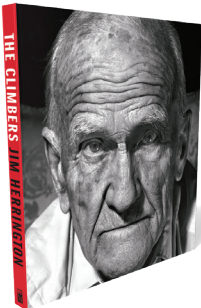
I hasten to confess that I know no Polish, but I believe any mountaineer more or less well versed with mountains everywhere and the development of mountaineering at home and abroad will be able to follow the Polish text of most entries. For many readers it could be a rewarding effort, since no other printed source will offer what this collection contains: accuracy, quantity and quality. Quantity, in this case, must be emphasized. The seven volumes total 5,402 pages. The text of most entries ends with a bibliography from international sources. Illustrations, in black and white, appear on almost every page of the entire set. Each volume also carries two sections of colour prints. Art illustrations, particularly European, often appear. The first volume, *Wprowadzenie*, works as a general dictionary of mountaineering in every aspect. Volumes II to V could be said to be the core of this ambitious

encyclopaedia, since they treat mountain ranges, individual peaks and even small rock pinnacles on every continent. Charts and sketch-maps, simple and functional, appear in every one of these four volumes. Volume VI is purely biographical. It seems to me that no person could possibly dare to count the number of mountaineers included, but I risk to say this volume must contain at least eight thousand of them, with several thousand graced with a small portrait. The seventh and last volume, *Suplement / Słownik / Indeks*, carries some 1,600 additional biographical entries and portraits, a dictionary of international mountaineering terminology (from 108 different languages), an addenda and corrigenda section and closes with a massive index of 789 pages.

Such are the raw statistics. Some time the editors Jan and Małgorzata Kiełkowski will have to explain to their readers how they were able to accumulate so much information and such a large and varied number of illustrations. No doubt, the computer age with its 'memory' loaned a helping hand. And besides, a number of mountaineers from Europe and South America contributed information and photographs. But we must also keep in mind that the editors were experienced travellers, climbers and even explorers, having made first ascents in the Andes of central Peru. But still, this collection must represent on the part of the editors at least 15 years of hard work, patience, knowledge, correspondence and then even more hard work.

The practical usefulness and merits of this collection are evident. The wealth of its content will make it a reference work for constant consultation. Being so completely international it will also compel readers everywhere to become more knowledgeable about the mountain peaks of our whole planet and more aware of the accomplishments of those unknown explorers climbing mountains in their own distant lands. One can only hope that the entire set will be translated into other languages. Its illustrations alone will make readers realize that there are expeditions yet to be undertaken, new peaks still to be won, new routes yet to be braved, mythology still to be made and history yet to be learned.

Evelio Echevarría



The Climbers

Jim Herrington

Essay by Greg Child

Foreword by Alex Honnold

Mountaineers Books, 2017, pp191, \$60.00

This is a sumptuous coffee-table book, taking in the realms of mountaineering, photography and fine art. Described in its blurb as a 'one-of-a-kind' collectors' volume', it is certainly a niche product and priced to match. It's also the outcome of the personal project and journey (in more ways than one) of Jim Herrington, known for his magazine photography of famous



Gwen Moffatt, among the very few women to feature in Jim Herrington's *The Climbers*. (Jim Herrington / *Mountaineers Books*)

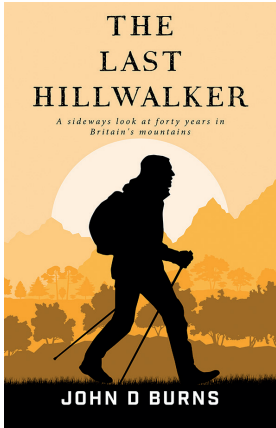
American rock musicians but also a climber. For the past 18 years, he has turned his lens to capturing images of key figures from what he judges to be 'the golden age of mountaineering'.

The images, all black and white, are beautifully captured and reproduced and cover familiar and some unfamiliar names. They all qualify on grounds of serious contributions to climbing, from the micro (John Gill) to the macro (Reinhold Messner). Many were photographed in their last years or even their last days. Herrington certainly captures late life well: mixing vulnerability with obvious strength of character. For those climbers I knew more about, the portraits – by dint of clothes, location or expressions – were often hugely insightful of their histories and personalities. Maybe this isn't surprising given Herrington's day job (his photos have graced the covers of high-end fashion and lifestyle magazines) and a climber's appreciation of his subject's achievements and reputations. Capturing their humanity, often through the quotidian, is a useful levelling device and counterpoint to our imbued memory of their god-like years. Occasionally, symbolic props are a little too obvious (Joe Brown in an old cotton anorak?) or overly ironic (John Gill with an ice axe?). Some photos are just weird (Robert Gabriel in his underpants and long socks). But most of the images are simply stunning.

The choice of climbers is obviously personal and spans back to some early US pioneers, including Jules Eichorn, Glenn Exum, Glen Dawson and David Brower. European names are well represented: Cassin, Maestri, Paragot and so on. There are many less well-known climbers whose achievements deserve greater recognition. An accompanying essay by Greg Child – richly informative but necessarily selective – reveals and contextualises some of their achievements. I had no idea David Brower, of Sierra Club and Friends of the Earth fame, was a pioneer of desert rock climbing. But sometimes it feels Child is trying too hard to shoehorn all of this 'golden age' into a neat narrative, with some rather too obvious 'cap-doffing', including an all-too-short section on female climbers. But it's a personable account that doesn't shy away from questioning Herrington's 'bucket list' ethos. Here Child quotes from Voytek Kurtyka's frank but friendly 'thanks, but no thanks' letter: '... it's too difficult to take part in this spectacle which is, whatever the noble intention [...] behind it, a display of "the death of heroes" or with a bit of imagination "the march of death". Forgive me. I'm not ready yet.'

Despite its quirks, Herrington's project has done climbing history a service although its necessarily selective approach will raise hackles for some.

Andy Tickle



The Last Hillwalker

A Sideways Look at Forty Years
in Britain's Mountains

John D Burns

John Burns, 2017, pp314, £9.99

John Burns begins his book with a winter ascent of Green Gully on Ben Nevis. The ice is fragile, his protection is poor, he is struggling for footholds and night is falling. He heaves himself past an overhang, then teeters up a final stretch of ice-glazed rock to reach the security of the summit plateau. He brings up his partner and the two savour the dusk.

Inexperienced climber out of his depth on a dangerous route is a familiar trope, and there are more to come. A young man ventures into the hills and on to the rocks for the first time, poorly equipped, making mistakes, somehow surviving. He takes us to the Lakes and Highlands, summer and winter, walking and climbing with inadequate or second-hand equipment, teaching himself to navigate as he goes along. There are encounters with tyrannical Youth Hostel wardens (now, happily an extinct breed); epic drinking bouts; and the inevitable car-crash, while heading for the Highlands through the night in a Morris Marina, from which he crawls out almost unscathed.

At first Burns' self-deprecating rites of passage seems all too familiar. But he lures you on with his precise and witty writing, his eye for evocative detail and his ear for dialogue, together with a sense of both time and place. Gradually the innocent abroad matures into a climber who tests himself in the Alps and Yosemite, and then joins the Cairngorm Mountain Rescue team, at which point we discern that this *faux naïf* is more accomplished and capable than he wanted to let on.

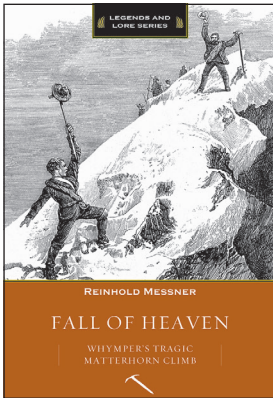
An intriguing personal story is laced through the narrative. Burns grew up in Bebington, Merseyside, studied sociology at Leicester in the 1970s and became a social worker in Yorkshire, followed by a posting in Inverness. For a time he believed he had achieved his nirvana, a salaried job in the Highlands. But then he made two abrupt decisions: he gave up both climbing and his salary in order to try his luck as a stand-up comedian. After achieving some success, he wrote a one-man play based on the life of Alesteir Crowley, followed by another about George Mallory. Both have the wit and rhythm of his writing, and I found the Mallory piece, which I saw at Kendal in 2016, poignant and affecting, notwithstanding some poetic exaggerations, which a Mallory biographer is likely to spot.

Following another epiphany, Burns returned to the hills, with the initial aim of rediscovering the joy of bothies. He now tells us how, walking to Ryvoan in the Cairngorms, he finds he is out of condition, overtaken by older walkers, feeling an imposter again. But the old sensations are rekindled, and he relates the pleasures of seeking out remote bothies, navigating

through storms with map and compass, crossing swollen rivers, nights spent with chance companions or alone, experiences which lead him to evaluate the forty years of his life that the book has traversed.

The early explorations and transgressions assume a new context, so that his story is likely to appeal to mountaineers and beyond: about how we forge connections to the wild, how we can enjoy our own company, how we come through adversity and how we assess our lives. Not only is our tottering Green Gully leader a far better mountaineer than he initially implies, he is a gifted and elegiac writer, escorting us on a journey that we all must make.

Peter Gillman



Fall of Heaven: Whymper's Tragic Matterhorn Climb

Reinhold Messner

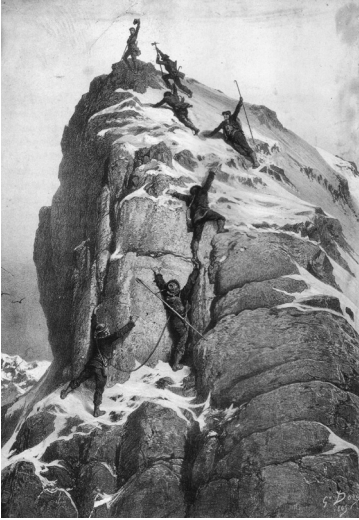
Translated by Billi Bierling

Mountaineers Books, 2017, pp204, £15

Much has been published on the first ascent of the Matterhorn but Whymper's letter to *The Times*, which appeared 25 days after the ascent, has remained the standard account. Whymper re-used this account in his book, *Scrambles amongst the Alps*, which was mostly written three years later during 1868, and this became his own accepted version of the climb over the last 40 years of his life.

The events of June and July 1865 make a wonderful tale of mountaineering success, chance meetings and national rivalry, in the middle of which were Whymper's astonishing six days of the Grandes Jorasses, the crossing of the Col Dolent and the Aiguille Verte. The drama of the summer culminated in two rival teams climbing on opposite sides of the mountain at the same time in a race to the unclimbed summit. The cast of characters – among them Whymper, Carrell, Hudson, Croz, McClintock, Francis Douglas, and (largely unknown to Whymper), Quintino Sella, Giordano and the aspirations of the Italian Alpine Club – only adds to the story.

Hence, to find that the legendary mountaineer Reinhold Messner had attempted to tell the story from the point of view of his compatriot Carrell, who played such a significant part in Whymper's life, was intriguing. Unfortunately, the book is disappointing. Credit is given to Alan Lyall's excellent bibliographic work on the Matterhorn ascent, but otherwise no use is made of the available resources on Whymper; anecdotes and, often incorrect, hearsay from different periods of Whymper's life are muddled together to give a simplistic view of a complex figure. As someone who worked for his living, Whymper was aware of the value of money, but he was not 'parsimonious' and could not be described as a 'dandy'. Conversations are created with no attributions; Whymper's book is randomly quoted as a record of events, but on other occasions is questioned. To say, as Messner does,



Gustav Doré's famous and famously imaginative lithograph of the first ascent of the Matterhorn: 'Arrival at the Summit'. He and Whymper met and both agreed that the £300 raised for the family of Michel Croz was 'not much for the life of a man'. For more on Doré's interpretation of the Matterhorn disaster, see A Lyall, 'The Matterhorn Lithographs of 1865', *Alpine Journal* 1995, pp215-21.

that Whymper was hoping to find an Inuit in Greenland to take him to the North Pole shows a surprising lack of historical knowledge, as well as an ignorance of Whymper's well documented trips to Greenland.

Messner is muddled about the events of 1865. That Whymper and Carrell climbed the Grand Tournalin in 1863, not 1865 as Messner says, is only one of many small errors.

He wants to show that Carrell's foremost care was for the safety of his party, and that Whymper was a cavalier English *monsieur*, but he does not try to understand Whymper. He says that 'Old Taugwalder was responsible for Douglas, and he would never have put his client's life at risk,' while ignoring the near catastrophe on the Obergabelhorn, where Douglas and Taugwalder fell through the summit cornice but were, by good fortune, held by their companion Viannin. Such a selective choice of which events to describe characterises Messner's book. It is disappointing that Messner does not use his undoubted knowledge of climbing to understand what it was actually like to be on the ridges of the Matterhorn in the 1860s. He questions why Croz was first on the rope descending, but this was exactly what Hudson and Croz had done one week earlier on the Aiguille Verte.

Messner does quote Whymper's words to imply that Whymper spent the rest of his life avoiding responsibility, and blaming the Taugwalders, but the real problem was that no one had responsibility, as Whymper well knew. Whymper was not directly involved in the accident, was not involved in arranging either the descent or roping up (although with hindsight he knew he should have been). The euphoria of finally succeeding, seeing the Italians still below them, the summit untrodden, and the lack of agreement about who was actually in charge – Hudson, Croz or Whymper – led to carelessness on the descent.

Whymper in public was always considerate of the deceased but in private knew that Hadow should not have been there, and that Hudson was at fault in not belying his young friend correctly. Whymper also knew that he should have been more involved, that someone should have been in charge, and this haunted him for the rest of his life. Whymper did criticise the behaviour of the Taugwalders on the descent, but he always paid credit to Old Peter's feat of holding his position and his prompt belay, and ruefully

recognised that if the rope had not broken, he would not have survived.

Whymper made no further entry in his journal after 2 July, so our knowledge of the events leading up to the ascent and the accident itself is dependent on what Whymper made public, but no one who spent any of this time with Whymper, for example Girdlestone and Lucy Walker, contradicted his account. It is therefore disappointing that Messner misses the opportunity to give an informed view from the Italian side, and merely relies on preconceived dislike of Whymper.

Ian Smith



Classics Routes in the Écrins

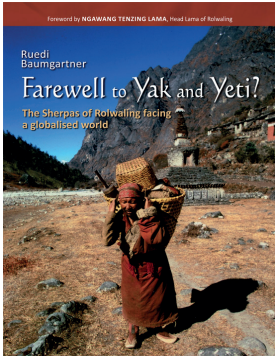
A Mountaineering Guide

Sébastien Constant

Éditions Constant, pp192, 2018, £27.95

Seb Constant is a well-known and experienced mountain guide based in L'Argentière-La-Besse in the east of the Écrins and is an expert in those parts of the southern Alps – the Écrins itself, Ceres, Queyras – which are wilder and less travelled than the main centres like Chamonix and consequently more appealing to those who like their mountains a bit more *sauvage*. This useful little guidebook offers

a rich selection of the best low and middle-grade routes in the broader Écrins from snow and ice, to mixed and pure rock climbs. 'So many of the routes presented here,' Constant writes, 'were pioneered by W A B Coolidge in the 1870s that this book could have been entitled In Coolidge's Footsteps. In fact, I have long drawn inspiration, in both my writings and my climbing, by his approach to mountaineering.' For those familiar with Coolidge's taste for controversy, this might seem surprising, but Constant is clear in his admiration, quoting from the preface of the 1905 guidebook to *The Central Alps of the Dauphiny*, co-authored with Henri Duhamel and Félix Perrin: 'It is only by the joint labours of many that our book can be made, as we earnestly desire it to be, the standard work for climbers who propose to explore the highest mountain group lying entirely within French territory.' This book sets itself up as that pioneering work's successor. Alongside more famous climbs, Constant has included a number of lesser-known objectives culled from his decades of experience and finishes with ten multi-day alpine tours, including, as an example, a six-day tour of the Ailefroide, starting at the Sélé hut, an east to west traverse of the Col du Sélé to the Pilatte hut, an ascent of Les Boeufs Rouges, the traverse of Mont Gieberney via the Says glacier to the Temple Écrins hut, an ascent of the Col des Avalanches and a return to Ailefroide via the Col de la Temple. As Constant regularly mentions, you need to be fit, especially in a region largely free of cable cars. Beautifully illustrated, clear and concise, the paucity of modern guidebooks to the Écrins makes this a more than welcome addition.



Farewell to Yak and Yeti?

The Sherpas of Rolwaling Facing
a Globalised World

Ruedi Baumgartner

Foreword by Ngawang Tenzing Lama

Vajra Books, pp315, 2015, £32.50

As it should be, Sherpas are increasingly reflecting for themselves on their meteoric journey: from remote pastoralists and farmers, via mountaineering, to an international diaspora that spans the world. This book, for example, has a blurb from the Sherpa sociologist Pasang Sherpa, who has written his own

book on the subject. How to explain and comprehend such a rapid and disorienting journey? The Sherpa community in Brooklyn is these days bigger than that of Khumbu. Eighty percent of Rolwaling Sherpas had settled in Kathmandu at the time of the last census in 2011. What is it, if anything, that holds these remarkable people together? 'To know where to go, we need to know where we came from,' Pasang writes, and so this long perspective is vitally useful. Ruedi Baumgartner first visited the Rolwaling, Khumbu's near neighbour, in the 1970s to conduct his PhD research and has worked in development aid ever since. This is his account of the change in Rolwaling Sherpa society over the past 40 years, covering three generations that have seen as much change as any other since the migration of Tibetan communities across the great divide got underway.

Mountaineering has been one of the catalysts in this transformation. (One Sherpani quoted in this book recounts how when her husband was working on expeditions, he earned more than she did running their restaurant. When he was trekking, it was the other way round. That's what climbing can mean in Nepal.) Longstanding relationships with western climbers gave Sherpas opportunities denied other marginalised groups in Nepal. That economic leverage led on to improved education so that the children of climbing Sherpas didn't need to take their lives in their hands to offer a better future to their children. (It's interesting that local monks were suspicious of the Hillary school built in Rowaling. Secular education might persuade young Sherpas to join the police or the army, where they might be required to kill. There is a hint here as well of the suspicion of the Nepali state, which had marginalised ethnic minorities for centuries.) You can track this process to increasingly remote corners of the Sherpa world. Rolwaling Sherpas, off the beaten track in comparison to Khumbu, were consequently later to the game and had to struggle for their place in the sun but have taken a similar road since. Everest guides will tell you that it is increasingly difficult to find good Sherpa workers on the mountain even as it transforms their economic stars. Given the risks and exploitation they have experienced, the worst of it from local operators, even Sherpa operators, it's hardly surprising that Sherpas are moving on from climbing. Equally,

the culturally rich and physically demanding world that existed before tourism – yak herding and potato cultivation – is also under threat.

Although he is an academic, Baumgartner is a lively writer, mixing personal stories, history and a firm grasp on the literature to produce a valuable and important book, one which many climbers with an interest in Himalayan culture would do well to acquire. Something like a quarter of Nepali mountain guides thus far qualified are from Rolwaling, including the first and only woman, Dawa Yangzum; it's a district with a central place in the mountaineering scene in Nepal. Beautifully illustrated, the highlight for me among the many excellent photographs was Tom Weir's portrait from 1952 of the six-year-old Lama Thupten Zopa Rinpoche, one of the founders of the Kopan monastery in Kathmandu. A curiosity to Weir, this small, self-possessed boy would go on to carry the resurgence of Buddhism in Nepal to the capital, propelled there in part by a transformation in Nepali society that had mountaineering as its catalyst. We should tread carefully, because we so often know not what we do.

Ed Douglas

