Reviews

'Crevasses aux glacier des Géants' by Gabriel Loppé, 1896,
oil on canvass, 49.5×37cm. *(Private Collection)*

Reviews

Royal Robbins
The American Climber
David Smart
Mountaineers Books, 2023, 256pp, £17.95

Should you be asked, dear reader, to name 'An American Climber', the first name that will spring to mind is almost certain to be that of Royal Robbins. He died in 2017 and this book is his family-authorised biography by Canadian author David Smart, Editorial Director of Gripped Publishing and the recipient of several literary awards including a Boardman-Tasker prize for his biography of Emilio Comici.

Obviously much has been written about Royal over the years, including – here in Britain – my own pen portrait in *Mountains* (Macmillan/1975) and the obituary in the 2018 edition of this very publication. Royal was, of course, a member of the AC, although he never claimed to be an alpinist per se, but a 'cragsman'. Though his multi-day solo ascents of two thousand foot rock walls are surely among the extreme manifestations of the mountaineering game.

The story opens in 1935 with Royal's traumatic birth in a deprived part of West Virginia and traces his difficult childhood; the family's move to California, his youthful delinquency and his discovery of both skiing and climbing. For a number of years the former talent was able to finance the latter. At 17 he was out-climbing Southern California's best at Tahquitz Rock and in due course made his first visit to Yosemite where he fell in with Warren Harding and the denizens of Camp 4. Always bold, calculating and very competitive, he set out to prove himself and by the time the military draft caught up with him, his name was already synonymous not only with 'The Valley' but with commitment and clean climbing.

Demobilised in 1959, a job in banking financed continued climbs in Yosemite, many of steps forward in terms of style, before Royal made his first obligatory visit to the European Alps. Never happy on snow and ice, he climbed a few Dolomite classics, notably put up two new routes on the Dru and spent a couple of seasons working for John Harlin – of Eiger Direct fame – both at the American School at Leysin and the associated International School of Mountaineering (ISM). He made frequent visits to Britain

where he liked the company, admired the ethos and enjoyed our beer. 'I come over to England to recharge my batteries' he once told me. Eventually, he managed to introduce British protection methods – nuts especially – to America.

Happily married in 1963 to Liz, a fine climber in her own right, Royal became a family man, settling in Modesto in California's Central Valley, within easy reach of Yosemite. Here Liz's family were in business and, in due course, Royal and Liz opened *Mountain Paraphernalia*, a state-of-the-art mountain equipment business which soon expanded and diversified with considerable success. Climbing and now lecturing continued across the contiguous USA while there were expeditions to big-wall-type climbs in Canada, as well as Alaska's Kichatna Spires. An ambitious foray to Patagonia proved disappointing.

But the big climbs belong to younger men, and now in middle age Royal took on the challenges of serious whitewater kayaking, for which there is scope aplenty in California; the game took him to Chile and Russia and kept the adrenaline flowing. A national figure now, more relaxed and with nothing to prove, Royal even dabbled in religion and spent time working on his several volume autobiography until, in 2010, he was diagnosed with an incurable brain disorder akin to Parkinson's. Eventually unable to speak but stoically writing almost to the end, he died in 2017. 'Climbing is Peace' he had written.

The Author's research has been wide and thorough, drawing on his personal communication with over seventy named contacts in both North America and Britain who knew Royal personally, supplemented by a bibliography of published sources in books, articles and films. Almost every major climb or achievement receives mention in the text against the background of Royal's life, loves and fortunes. Especially telling is a four page resumé of Royal's major first or first free ascents, some 170 of them between 1952 and 2003, complete with date, grade and name of rope-mate – if any. The book ends with copious notes on each of the ten chapters, a bibliography and a three page summary of Royal's own writings – his several books and dozens of magazine and journal articles.

Throughout the book Smart expands upon Royal's philosophy of climbing which doubtless will intrigue many readers. Well-read, thoughtful, fluent and often outspoken, he carried on a voluminous correspondence with editors, friends and other climbers, frequently spelling out his thinking and attracting the sobriquet 'The Conscience of Rock Climbing' from *The New York Times*.

This is an exhaustive biography, warts and all, of an extraordinary man. If you are interested in Yosemite climbing – or indeed leading edge rock climbing anywhere – and what it is that makes a leading climber tick, you will find this a fascinating read.

John Cleare

Harold Raeburn
The Steps of a Giant
Peter J Biggar
Scottish Mountaineering Press, 2024, 465pp, £30

Harold Raeburn is one of the mythic figures of British mountaineering, a true pioneer from the age when Scottish mountaineering was being forged. Routes in his name are to be found in Scotland's most celebrated locations: Raeburn's Arete on Ben Nevis; Raeburn's Buttress on both Carn Dearg and Sgurr Ruadh; the list goes on. Raeburn is also renowned as the leader of the mountaineering segment of the first British expedition to Everest in 1921, the reconnaissance that spent three months searching for a route onto the mountain, finally succeeding in locating and identifying the North Col as the launch-point for the subsequent expeditions of 1922 and 1924.

Peter Biggar spent the best part of a decade researching his biography of Raeburn, subtitled 'The Steps of a Giant'. It is a monumental achievement, an encyclopaedic compendium of all Raeburn's climbs, lovingly compiled from Scottish Mountaineering Club records, diaries and accounts by Raeburn's contemporaries, previous works by SMC historians, and Raeburn's own writings. The route descriptions are detailed and evocative, inspiring admiration for these colossi of Victorian mountaineering who, through their bravery and tenacity, pushed the limits of climbing with rudimentary equipment. Here, you sense, Biggar is in his element. At the same time, he faced the problem that, outside the mountaineering sphere, there were very few records of Raeburn's activities, and Biggar admits that, on occasion, he is forced to resort to speculation. In consequence Raeburn remains a shadowy figure, his motives to be deduced from his descriptions of his climbing, at times exultant in their sense of achievement. There is also a problem when we arrive at 1921 and Raeburn's leadership of the Everest reconnaissance. Raeburn, who was also prey to mental illness, was stricken with what was likely a case of dysentery and was absent for much of the expedition. Its members, including George Mallory, were critical of him in their own writings. Biggar provides a spirited defence of Raeburn, but goes too far, I feel, in his denigration of Mallory, setting him up to help sustain his arguments.

Raeburn was born in 1865, the son of a brewer who owned Usher's Brewery in Edinburgh. He studied chemistry at Heriot-Watt College and spent his working life with the family brewing business, although details of what he did there are scant. He most likely started climbing through his interest in ornithology and egg-collecting, which took him to Shetland where he tackled cliffs and sea-stacks to further his quest. He took to hill walking and then climbing, and became a member of the SMC in 1896, by which time he had made impressive ascents on Ben Lui and Ben Nevis, where he was in the party that made the first ascent of the Direct Route of the Douglas Boulder – climbed at Easter on 160ft of rope, without gloves.

By the turn of the century Raeburn had notched up a series of routes that would become his legacy. They included a solo first ascent of *Observatory Ridge* in June 1901, *Observatory Buttress*, solo, in June 1902, Raeburn's Arete (as it was named) on North-East Buttress with William and Jane Inglis Clark two days later, and the first winter ascent of *Green Gully* in 1906: Raeburn cut steps up steep ice with his axe, establishing the hardest ice climb yet achieved. He was active on the Buachaille in Glen Coe, making the first three ascents of Crowberry Gully, including one in the winter of 1909. Biggar brings these events to life, evoking both admiration and envy for the pioneers who had these legendary crags at their disposal, selecting the lines of their first ascents among virgin territory. They were very fit, travelled light and often moved up their routes together – and yet, as Biggar records, there were no fatalities among this group during those early years. Along the way we encounter some of the most numinous names in mountaineering: AE Robertson, Norman Collie and William Ling among others.

The outbreak of the First World War reduced mountaineering activities. Raeburn went to work in an aircraft factory in Glasgow, although further details are elusive. The book now takes an interesting structural turn. After relating Raeburn's Scottish climbing to 1918, Biggar takes us back to 1900 to start his account of his climbing in the Alps and greater ranges. Raeburn began in the Dolomites, followed by visits to Zermatt and Chamonix, climbing the Matterhorn, Weisshorn, Dent du Géant and Monte Rosa. The list of annual ascents becomes ever more impressive. Highlights included Mont Blanc by the Rochers, the traverse of the Rothorn, the traverse of the Grand and Petit Drus, often in the teeth of snowstorms.

In 1911 there was a hiatus in Raeburn's activities. Biggar notes that he was 'treated at home for melancholia', although this was covered up by his climbing colleagues. In 1913 and 1914 he made trips to the Caucasus, recording an impressive number of first ascents. When the war started, Raeburn made an epic month-long journey home across Europe, during which he displayed both resilience and kindness. In the book, the strands of Biggar's account, British and overseas mountaineering, are now reunited in 1914. The war having been accounted for the first time round, we move forward to Raeburn's culminative climbs: a solo traverse of the Meije in 1919, and the first winter ascent of *Observatory Ridge* on the Ben in 1920. This last was a truly epochal feat, celebrated on the summit plateau with acid drops, brandy balls and chocolate. It also marked 'the glorious but abrupt end' of Raeburn's Scottish mountaineering, for it was his last Scottish climb.

Raeburn entered a new arena, conducting an exploratory expedition to Kangchenjunga. It was an extraordinary venture and Raeburn undertook it twice in 1920. He had an ulterior motive, namely to get as close as possible to Everest, then coming into focus as the new goal of British mountaineering. He had thus positioned himself to be invited to lead the mountaineering side of the 1921 Reconnaissance at the age of 56. The outcome was close to disaster. Raeburn was taken ill during the long trek across Tibet and in a further catastrophe the expedition's oxygen expert, Alexander Kellas, died.

Both men most likely suffered from amoebic dysentery. Mallory became the climbing leader and eventually located a route to the North Col, opening the way to the summit.

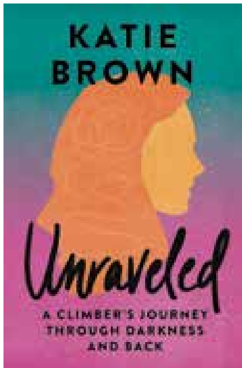
Mallory was notoriously critical of Raeburn, calling him 'too old' and 'incompetent'. Biggar exacts revenge on Raeburn's behalf, citing the 'magisterial' Everest history by Walt Unsworth, who considered Mallory 'a drifter, uncommitted and indecisive'. Biggar dates this judgment to 2000 but in fact Unsworth made it in the first edition of his book which was published in 1981. It was a puzzle to Everest historians such as Audrey Salkeld, who did much research for Unsworth, and felt he had developed a strange animus towards Mallory. Since that time, several biographies have rebutted Unsworth's caricature, presenting a full portrait of a mountaineer who was both committed and decisive in pursuing his goals – as evidenced by his persistence in searching for a route to the North Col in 1921. (Declaration of interest: I co-authored one of the said Mallory biographies.)

Other expedition members made similar judgments to Mallory. When Raeburn recovered from his illness, he made a heroic trek to rejoin the expedition. He notoriously incurred the anger of his fellow members when he failed to collect their incoming mail en route, and Biggar cites his justification: he did not know where the expedition was, and thought it could send runners to collect the mail more quickly than he could carry it. The biggest problem for Raeburn was feeling like a supernumerary when he was reunited with the other members. He was accustomed to acting as leader and his role had been superseded by Mallory and Charles Howard-Bury. For once, Raeburn revealed his hurt feelings in diaries and letters, leading Biggar to conclude that 'he must have felt rather useless and the odd man out.'

Despite this glimpse into Raeburn's mental state, Biggar does not really get to grips with his mental illness. Earlier in the book Biggar drops clues, suggesting that Raeburn had been badly affected by the death of his older brother William, drowned in a yachting accident in 1880. His discussion is cursory and avoids any terminology of mental illness; from the symptoms he lists, it seems likely that Raeburn was suffering from depressive paranoid schizophrenia.

Raeburn met a poignant end, related in the medical records which Biggar has unearthed. He spent the last five years of his life in an asylum, mute and passive, subjected to force-feeding to keep him alive. He died on 21 December 1926. He was buried two days later in a cemetery in north Edinburgh. Biggar records that when an SMC member searched for it in 1997, he found the grave in a remote corner and had to cut away the undergrowth with a machete. However, in a fitting memorial, Raeburn's ice axe is now an insignia of office for the president of the SMC. Biggar's biography provides a matching tribute. It is beautifully designed and produced, with a wealth of photographs and illustrations that enhance the sense of time and place his writing evokes.

Peter Gillman



Unraveled
A Climber's Journey Through Darkness and Back
Katie Brown
Mountaineers Books, 2022, 256pp, £17.00

Unraveled: A Climber's Journey Through Darkness And Back by Katie Brown is an unusual winner of the Boardman Tasker Award. Its only reference to alpine mountaineering is a beginner's day out 'choss-a-neering' in the Rockies. The narrative is as much about mental health challenges and family dysfunction as it is about anything climbing-related. Most of all, its author, Katie Brown, repeatedly professes that at the height of her climbing success she 'hated' the sport.

And yet it is also the memoir of a woman Lynn Hill once described as 'the best female sport climber in history' – one of the first generation of 'comp kids' who, along with Tommy Caldwell, Beth Rodden, Chris Sharma and others, took the indoor climbing world by storm in the late '90s. She won multiple World Cup and X Games titles, flashed the first 5.14 she tried (being the first woman to do so), and, at the age of 20, had 'won every national climbing competition I had ever entered'. This is not a memoir of crevasses, altitude sickness, and storm-bound bivouacs. Arguably it is not primarily a climbing memoir at all. But it is completely compelling.

Recall if you can the typical climbing memoir. It begins with a moonlit account of a solo ascent (*Alone On The Wall*), or the travel towards a major objective (Rodden's recently-released *A Light Through The Cracks*), or an explicit reflection on past achievements (given ironically if you're a tax man – *No Easy Way* – or emotionally if you survived an epic on Denali – *The Bond*). In all those examples there's a sense of purpose, of determination, of achievement, and of the goal of climbing. *Unraveled*, instead, begins with an argument between Brown and her mother, over what specifically was the illness that Brown had experienced and nearly been destroyed by as a teenager, and which from the very first pages is revealed as an eating disorder.

Immediately we're into the style of a mainstream (non-climbing) commercial memoir – all dramatic scenes and action, though in a voice which is surprisingly matter-of-fact given the deeply distressing psychological content it contains. In the depiction of dysfunctional family dynamics *Unraveled* is akin to Andre Agassi's memoir *Open*, a book in which the traumas visited upon a child sporting prodigy by their parent are as prominent as stories of the sport itself. I found myself thinking too about Kamila Valieva, the 15-yr-old Russian figure skater who was disqualified for doping halfway through the 2022 Olympics.

That my thoughts turned more to memoirs in other sports than to other climbing memoirs is significant. There are, of course, other climbing memoirs which directly and unflinchingly address turbulent mental states and a number of mountaineers now speak openly about PTSD. Perhaps the first to do this was the late David Roberts in *Mountains Of My Fear*. (Brown cites Roberts as having pushed and inspired her to write this book.) But unlike other climbing narratives which tackle mental ill-health, in *Unraveled*, the eating disorder content and other psychological distortions are at the very heart of the material.

This is a book with a message: that climbing and disordered eating often go together, a topic which has gained increasing prominence in the last few years, including from Brown's friend Beth Rodden. There's been Caroline Treadaway's documentary '*Light*' from 2021, which interviews sport and bouldering stars including Emily Harrington and Kai Lightner, and eating disorders now frequently receive column inches in climbing magazines.

Generally in such reflections, there's an attempt to send a clear message: that nutrition in climbing is essential, that super-skinny frames can only be sustained for so long, and that, in the longer term, it is good all-round health that results in higher grades, not a low BMI. In *Unraveled*, though, it's unclear the extent to which even Brown considers the desperate pain of a severe eating disorder, her breakdown, and periods of suicidal thinking to be related to her climbing. This reader got the sense that – given her family background – some sort of breakdown was inevitable, though a sport in which power to weight ratios play such a large role surely made matters worse.

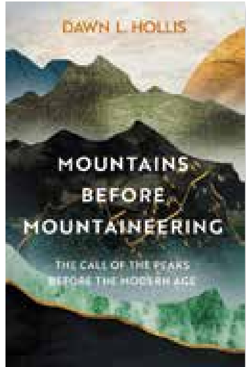
Amidst all this, there remains an intriguing question: how on earth did Brown manage to keep winning major events despite being so seriously ill? There must be an answer there about the sheer determination which has inspired many mountaineers to acts of unbelievable endurance – though the extremes they faced were more often to do with the physicality of the mountains rather than the internal mental extremes with which Brown grappled. The even bigger question, though, is one Brown asks herself, one which she is repeatedly asked by other people in the book, and one which Stephen Venables raised in person during the Boardman Tasker Award ceremony: 'how did you get so good?'

Because, in purely climbing terms, Brown appears almost super-human. She wins X Games and World Championships titles in her late teens – and continues winning them even when she's so exhausted from starvation that she falls asleep in the isolation area and has to be woken with seconds to go before she needs to make her climb. Even on her very first trip to a climbing wall as a young child she is able to scamper up the route with ease. 'Is that normal?' her mother asks. And the instructor replies, 'Nope.'

Personally, I'd have been interested in deeper reflection on that – perhaps on the mental and physical qualities it required, and on the paradox of such a dysfunctional childhood having somehow produced them. I'd have been interested also in more discussion of the experience of comp climbing versus climbing in the outdoors (we get a bit of outdoor climbing, late on, but it's not a focus). I'd have liked to know what it feels like to go from being a top-class climber to becoming the makeup artist Brown now is, and any changed perspective on the world that might have resulted from that. But that's not

what this memoir is. It is instead a searing account of eating disorders, mental turmoil and achievement against the odds. And if there's joy, it is only in knowing that Brown too has persisted against those odds.

Kate Armstrong



Mountains Before Mountaineering
The Call of the Peaks Before the Modern Age
Dawn L. Hollis
The History Press, 2024, 240pp, £22.00

There is a term which occasionally gets thrown around in discussions of public policy and social discourse: 'zombie statistic'. Put simply, a zombie statistic is a figure of questionable validity which nevertheless worms its way into the conversation and becomes near impossible to remove from the collective consciousness. For example, readers will undoubtedly have heard that they should drink eight glasses of water a day to stay healthy. While this statement is demonstrably incorrect, (the original source on which it is based noted that most of our fluid intake should come from food), you will still commonly hear people asserting it as fact. This concept is not limited to statistics and in fact extends into the realm of 'zombie ideas' or, in the nomenclature of *Mountains Before Mountaineering*, 'ghost ideas'.

Dawn L Hollis's engagingly written pop-academic text seeks to unpick one ghost idea in particular; that prior to the modern age human beings had an innate distaste for the mountains. It is a view that Hollis, an historian of the early modern period ('around 1450 to 1800') with a particular interest in mountains, has encountered often, even from those with no great interest in mountains or history. As the book demonstrates, It was even an attitude espoused by some early members of the Alpine Club.

Over the course of five central chapters, each focussing on a different aspect of mountains and mountaineering in the early modern period – adventurers, mountain inhabitants, culture, science and how the first modern mountaineers sought to define themselves against the past – Hollis explains how she became sceptical of this notion of early modern 'mountain gloom'. Often this is achieved by introducing the reader to her 'friends'; figures from history with whom she has spent so much time that they have become like old acquaintances. This relaxed, inviting approach is typical of Hollis's style, her conversational prose underscoring both her skill as a communicator and her mastery of her subject area.

These early modern 'friends' count among their number some familiar names, not least the infamous Petrach and his ascent of Mont Ventoux (1912m). Yet Hollis's accounting is not nearly as limited as those histories that would characterise Petrach as the lone starting gun of mountaineering and his is but one voice among many in Hollis's narrative.

Above all, Hollis exhorts us not to view early modern mountaineers as either wholly like or wholly removed from our modern selves. Instead she stresses the importance of viewing them and their attitudes as being products of their unique time and culture. The great film critic Roger Ebert famously described movies as 'empathy machines' that allow audiences to walk in another person's shoes. In its best moments, *Mountains Before Mountaineering* achieves something similar, conveying to the reader a deep sense of the individuals being discussed.

By understanding the religious and classical influences of the era, we come to see why early modern individuals showed an interest in different mountains to those we prioritise today. By looking at the technology of the time and the ways in which people travelled, we can conceive of how prominence rather than altitude was the determinant of a mountain's height to the early modern mind. I was pleased to learn that by early modern standards, I have ascended the highest peak on Earth, having walked to the top of Tenerife's Mount Teide. Though unlike Marmaduke Rawdon, who made his ascent in the 1600s, I did not stand atop another man's shoulders to be 'the nearest heaven of any man living'.

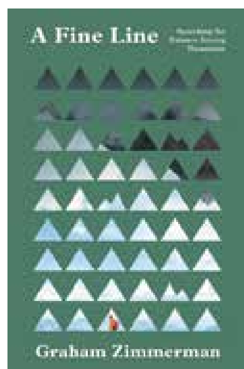
This deep understanding of the early modern mind is also how Hollis makes one of her most crucial arguments as she recontextualises the work of natural philosopher Thomas Burnet, showing how his apparent disgust at the irregularity of mountain landscapes was a result, not of innate natural inclination, but of his struggle to marry together his scientific understanding of the world and his Christian faith.

In some respects, the scope of *Mountains Before Mountaineering* is narrow. Hollis herself is open about the chronological limitations she is placing on this discussion. She is also clear that her thesis is based almost entirely on western sources, and often affluent, genteel sources at that. At the same time, one cannot ignore the breadth of sources she pulls from in order to make her case; blending art, literature, science, cartography, poetry, religion, agricultural practice, myth and travel writing to give a full sense of the period. She also expends no little effort in exploring the lives of early modern mountain inhabitants who, unlike their wealthy visitors, did not leave behind copious written records.

In the book's epilogue, Hollis moves beyond her unpicking of the notion that 'people didn't like mountains back then' to argue for the embrace of a more early modern attitude to the mountains in general; one which eschews the summit in favour of a more holistic approach. Humans often see ourselves as living at the moment of greatest enlightenment and progress, the vanguard of Theodore Parker's 'long arc of history'. Yet, in considering the complex, creative and more experiential ways in which early modern mountaineers conceived of the mountains, it is hard not to feel that something has been lost. The modern mountaineering imagination finds itself limited by spot heights, satellite mapping and the endless cataloguing of worthy and unworthy 'firsts'. I am too unreconstructed a climber to favour abandoning the summit entirely as Hollis suggests, but an approach to the

mountains which puts the summit second to culture, nature and emotion has the potential to be far more fulfilling than the sterile modernity of the summit alone.

Adam Butterworth



A Fine Line
Graham Zimmerman
Mountaineers Books, 2023, 220pp, £16.95

Graham Zimmerman's chronicle of his life and climbs is a compelling, and at the same time, easy read, a page turner. The author sums up his story to date in the sub-title; 'Searching for Balance Among Mountains'. Many alpinists and readers of alpine literature will know that mountains are not renowned for providing either balance or mental stability, hence there are moments where the reader will stop and think about their own life and experiences.

Few mountaineers achieve the tranquillity known to poets seeped in eastern mysticism. Yet when reading some of the passages in the book, there are moments where the author comes close to that loss of self that can happen in extremis on a big climb, or when studying a map at home through a magnifying glass;

'Gradually imagined landscapes transformed into real mountains; dense contour lines turned into steep ridges and faces; elusive dreams turned into tangible forms of rock and snow.'

And when he arrives amid those imagined landscapes, the creation of an internal yet visible map continues;

'I sat on a rocky outcrop in the midst of a steep icefall below Changri Tower. One by one, I sketched in my journal the succession of ridges that faded into the vanishing point. As the sunset spread deep crimsons and purples over the horizon, I imagined all the journeys that had taken place in the sea of mountains before me: the first people who ventured up the valley seeking pastures; the early climbers who strove to reach the wild summits.'

Zimmerman shows a strong attachment to the people who share the same planet as the mountains he loves. Some alpinists become reclusive, not Zimmerman. The stability of mundane routine draws Zimmerman back to the everyday world of work as a geologist. His home world provides a counterpoint to the intensity of extreme alpinism. He examines the nature of friendship, recognising that true friends are those that help shape a full and long life. He is not shy either when talking about lovers, the deaths of friends and family members, and the development and sharing of a loving relationship with his girlfriend ,and then wife, Shannon.

There are moments when their shared experiences resemble a script for a romcom. Yet walking the fine line between living a climber's life to the full – making regular and remarkable first ascents – and the potential for the

disaster that death in the mountains would bring to loved ones, is a dark thread that runs throughout the book. Zimmerman's analysis of this dilemma accompanies each of his excursions into the mountains, and provides the inspiration for some powerful writing.

Above all, Zimmerman takes a reflective approach to the art of alpinism. While accepting the previous American generations' mantras of extreme fitness and the acknowledgement of the pain needed to live on the edge, he finds in the life of Mark Twight mirrors of his own experiences. Like Twight, Zimmerman recognises the need to step back from that edge if a full life is to be led. He quotes from Twight's essay 'Heaven Never Laughed' where Twight writes about the loss of his best friend;

'I studied his accident thoroughly as the other ones. I dwelled on it because I wanted to live. Grief is allowed but a small toe hold here.'

Zimmerman follows this with his own reflection;

'I had first read the book when I was 18 years old staring down the barrel of a life dedicated to the mountains. I'd read the book (Twight's) over and over again, and wondered at a life lived so close to the edge that some of us would not survive. It was romantic, it was muscular, I wanted to live among those brave souls who toed the edge. ... Now I sat looking at Shannon and her grandmother. No longer 18 years old – I was 30 – I was filled with memories of lost close friends, each of whom I had granted only a small toehold of grief.'

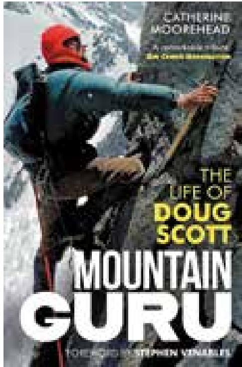
I make this connection because in a world fragmented by the instant gratification of social media hits, fake news and short-termism, Zimmerman connects the legacy of the past, and its consequences, to inform his life and his future.

The mountains also inform Graham about a much bigger crisis we all face. In 2021 while attempting an alpine style ascent of K2 via the as yet unclimbed direct finish, he and Ian Welsted found themselves sat at 6400m at noon in 14°C temperatures watching stonefall strafe their intended line. Climate change became a reality for him, as it has for all alpinists.

Even in winter, temperatures in the Himalaya are much warmer than they were 40 years ago. For example, winter temperatures at Everest base camp this past year averaged a toasty -10 to -15°C, very unlike the -40 to -50°C I experienced there in the winter of 1980/81. Zimmerman has become, and remains, very active in a movement called Protect our Winters (POW), lobbying for systemic solutions to the climate crisis.

The final thing to say about *A Fine Line* is that it is a great read for those who love adventure alpinism. It includes such remarkable climbs as the first ascent of Link Sar in 2019 with Chris Wright, as the other young(er) gun, and the remarkably resilient old stagers Mark Richey and Steve Swenson. This to date is the most remarkable of Zimmerman's many dozens of climbs which feature in the book, including several in unknown corners of Alaska with hints of much more yet to be done. But Zimmerman has also set his sights on reaching the age of 100 years. As with any climbing objective, there are no guarantees of achieving this, but it is a challenge as good as any we live for; and I wish him success in all his endeavours.

John Porter



Mountain Guru
The Life of Doug Scott
Catherine Moorehead
Birlinn, 2023, 368pp, £25

Doug Scott wrote a great deal about his life and mountaineering exploits, although for decades the odd publisher who had given him an advance for his autobiography must have wondered if it would ever happen. It seemed he had too much rage for life to sit down long enough to write a big book. In his later years though, when he'd calmed down a little, it all came together. In 2015 he published *Up and About*, a substantial autobiography that took him up to his ascent of Everest and included a lot of detail and feeling for his family and his roots in Nottingham. He published books about *The Ogre* (2017), including his famous epic, and *Kangchenjunga* (2021), including an account of his own historic ascent. These volumes now sit alongside earlier accounts of his alpine-style ascent of *Shisha Pangma* (1984) and the comprehensive and absorbing pictorial climbing biography *Himalayan Climber* that Ken Wilson published in 1992. Quite a legacy.

Interviewing him for a film project about The Ogre in 1992, I asked him for what he thought he'd be remembered. Quick as a flash he offered me three possibilities: his first British ascent of Everest via the south-west face in 1975; his epic retreat two years later from The Ogre with two broken legs, having made the first ascent; and for telling and re-telling Don Whillans' famous gag on Karl Herrligkoffer's 1972 Anglo-German Everest expedition. In late April that year, during the quarterfinals of the UEFA European Championships, West Germany beat England 3-1 in front of more than 90,000 fans at Wembley. After hearing the result on All-India radio, Felix Kuen, one of the German members of the team, said to Don, 'I haf just heard we haf beaten you at your national sport.' Without missing a beat, Don replied: 'Aye lad, but we beat you at your national sport twice.'

Catherine Moorehead, in this first biography of Scott, sprints through the first two of Doug's legacy, perhaps wisely given how thoroughly they've been documented previously in other books, and she skips the Whillans yarn altogether. Yet the latter was oddly revealing. Why did Doug tell and keep telling someone else's story? It wasn't that he didn't have his own sense of humour and was borrowing somebody else's. Doug was a deeply humorous man, something this book sometimes overlooks. In my filmed interview he was giggling and laughing all the way through and it had nothing to do with the mushrooms from his beloved vegetable garden. Climbing was fun in the world of Doug Scott, even if it came occasionally, as I found out myself, at the expense of his fellow climbers.

What he liked about that story, I think, was Don's timing. The joke itself had been made years before Don delivered it. (Margaret Thatcher, who Don admired, later used almost the same version to German chancellor Helmut Kohl.) It was Don's timing that appealed to Doug. Because while Doug was funny, he couldn't deliver a line the way Don could. Doug would already be giggling before he delivered the payoff.

A discussion with Doug could often develop into an introspective and convoluted exploration of your inner being with many side roads and diversions. Yet he appreciated the directness with which Whillans approached the world. Doug told me how 'Don held a mirror up to yourself.' Whillans knew how to bring you down to earth. 'You were alright when you were one of those Nottinghamshire lads,' Doug quoted Whillans as saying. 'It's when you got hooked into that Hi Chi that it all went wrong.'

Being one of the lads had certainly been a big part of Doug's early climbing career but after Everest he never became some kind of aloof star; it was more that he was restlessly curious and had moved on. You can detect maybe a little bit of envy in Don's tease. Yet Doug remained intensely loyal to Don, inviting him on two of his freewheeling expeditions in the 1980s, to Shivling and Broad Peak, long past Don's prime and not long before his tragically young death. Doug felt he owed Don for the phone call in early 1972 that brought him to Everest for the first time. Doug was humble enough to acknowledge that if he hadn't already quit teaching and become more available then Don might have called someone else.

That moment was pivotal in Doug's life. He had grown up in an aspirant working-class family. His father was a policeman who had been a successful boxer. *Mountain Guru* starts with an overlong family history, which Doug had already laboured through in his autobiography. His climbing was rooted in Nottingham, where he and a group of mates set up the Nottingham Climbers' Club, a sort of wild young alternative to the Oread, who were drawn more from the professional classes.

Doug was always part of the gang, macho and driven and probably politically incorrect by today's measure. The NCC became a kind of entourage for Doug, although fellow member Bob Wark tells a fun story, not in the book, about Doug asking his mates to stand around him on a dance floor so he could change from his dirty outdoor clothes into his glad rags. With perfect timing and only a nod and a wink, they all leapt aside when Doug was at his most exposed. Doug laughed along with the rest of them, but he could be quite Sicilian if he really felt you'd betrayed him. Doug on the warpath could be quite frightening.

The first part of this story is a rather meandering Hobbit-like journey of low-budget trips often with mates from the NCC to places like the deserts of Chad and the wilds of Baffin Island. During this period I made my first film with Doug about his first ascent of the *Nose Direct* on Strone Ulladale, his companion piece to the Scoop. The climb relied almost entirely on artificial techniques – pitons, bat-hooks and copperheads – that reflected Doug's early pragmatism. There's a sharp contrast here with the argument he has later in the book with Greg Child close to the summit of Lobsang Spire as Child used aid in the final feet as the only solution to gaining the summit.

Maybe the leopard really had changed his spots. On the way home from the Strone Doug persuaded me to take a diversion via the offices of the *Glasgow Herald* so he could sell his story for the princely sum of £15, which barely covered the petrol. He did though get his pictures developed as well, 'so it was a win youth.' He was always canny at using the media to his benefit.

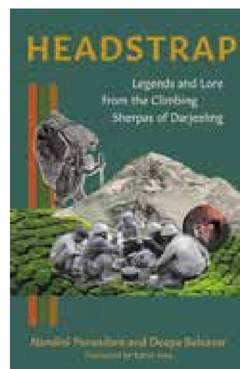
The public profile he achieved after Everest was something else altogether but he put it to good use in the third part of his life, after the rich climbing decade and a half that followed. In his early years as a teacher and penny-pinching expedition organiser he was always strapped for cash and empathised with the poor indigenous people he met along the way. When he became world famous he was able to repay the kindness he was shown, taking a leaf from Ed Hillary's book but concentrating on less familiar corners of the Nepal Himalaya with his charity Community Action Nepal. The effort and energy he put into CAN were extraordinary. He was still raising money in his final illness.

Almost inevitably, running a charity had its personality problems, of which there is rather too much in *Mountain Guru*. As ever it was Doug's way or the highway and as we learn throughout the book Doug Scott didn't take prisoners. I suspect his appetite for confrontation was quite handy for cutting through red tape. Being in a relationship with him was probably no less bracing. His personal life was notoriously complicated with two divorces before a calmer, happier third marriage. That is not so unusual in the life of adventurers. I once counted up how many of my skydiving friends had split because of their all-consuming passion and stopped counting at 13. Climbing is the same.

At times this book read to me too much like a catalogue of Doug's life and times, which made me wonder for whom it was written. There weren't enough revealing anecdotes that got to the heart of the man, his many contradictions and why he inspired so many. So those who knew him may think it a chance missed. Those who didn't know him may wonder what the fuss was about. I guess 'you can't please all the people all of the time' as Doug's favourite Bob Dylan sang. Perhaps the most surprising thing the uninformed will learn from this book is that he didn't die climbing. With all his epics, it wasn't for lack of trying.

Doug knew he wasn't the best climber technically but he put himself out there and found himself in the right place at the right time. His immense physical and psychological strength came into its own at high altitude. He could be overbearing, even bullying. But as a friend put it to me after Doug's death: 'What are we going to do without him?'

Leo Dickinson



Headstrap
Legends and Lore from the Climbing Sherpas of Darjeeling
Nandini Purandare and Deepa Balsavar
Mountaineers Books, 2024, 423pp, £23.61

The land mass of the Himalaya is such that its Indigenous peoples are spread across an extensive area of the Asian continent. While the religions and wider cultures of these peoples vary, common threads run through their stories – reverence for the mountains above them, strength born from the hardships of living at altitude in a landscape of extreme geographies and weather patterns, a deep connection with their families, friends and the landscapes around them, to name a few.

Headstrap is a book focussed on the Darjeeling Sherpas, the community of people who, centuries ago, first migrated from Tibet to Nepal and then to the foothills of the Himalaya in northern India, becoming renowned for their skills as expedition porters from the turn of the 20th century. The content of the book is based upon oral histories collected by its authors: Nandini Purandare, economist, Honorary President of the Himalayan Club and editor of *The Himalayan Journal* and Deepa Balsavar, a writer and illustrator of children's books and adjunct associate professor at the Industrial Design Centre, IIT Bombay.

These histories were collected during the extensive time the authors spent with the Sherpas in their homes in Toong Soong, the Sherpa village in Darjeeling. Hundreds of hours of interviews were recorded in Nepali, Hindi and English, each of which was then translated and transcribed prior to being distilled into the narratives of *Headstrap*.

In their introduction Purandare and Balsavar note how they came to recognise that, more than oral histories, they were collecting memories, making the important point that sometimes these memories, whilst believed to be fact by the person(s) retelling them, were not always wholly accurate.

'It took time to understand that it was memories, personal and intimate, rather than the written accounts, that should be the focus of our work – after all, memories let us into people's hearts and minds.'

While the authors made every effort for these histories to be based completely in fact (detailed further research into any available archives for example), their observation also reflects the significant gap in the literature *Headstrap* fits into. Despite the Sherpas' major role in many of the world's greatest mountaineering achievements (of which many books have been written), their complete history has previously been reliant on being passed down the generations by word of mouth. Such tales are likely to become changed and perhaps embellished as they begin to pass into legend.

The blurb of the book's back cover describes *Headstrap* as a 'culturally rich and evocative narrative'. This richness in observation and writing was a key

takeaway for me; the book tells stories of the Sherpas' strength, courage and achievements in the mountains but, even more than this, it shines a light on their lives. Their families, support networks, pride in educational achievement and more, all with a backdrop of the mountains above; entities that drive them spiritually as well as offering them physical challenge and the means to make a living.

The stories in *Headstrap* recount the backgrounds of those Sherpas most famous for their mountaineering achievements. Tenzing Norgay of course, but also Nawang Gombu, Nawang Topgay and many more, including Ani Daku Sherpa, one of the earliest woman porters. While the mountaineering achievements of these Sherpas are both impressive and important to write of, the empathy with which Purandare and Balsavar recount their wider lives – the tenacity the Sherpas showed to achieve, their relationships with friends and family, having to cope with tragedy and the ways they lived – bring the reader to the Sherpas' lives in new ways.

The history of mountaineering in the region and its far-reaching influence are explored and discussed as a backdrop to the Sherpa tales – the introduction of the Tiger Badges as a means for Sherpas to prove exceptional high altitude and expedition experience and so justify higher rates of pay, the beginnings of The Himalayan Club and its continuing influence, the 1954 establishment in Darjeeling of the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute (HMI). The list goes on. As such, the reader is shown important developments in Himalayan mountaineering through the eyes of the people who, behind the scenes, facilitated and played a huge part in many of the first ascents of the 8000ers and other major peaks.

As the children and grandchildren of the first generation Darjeeling Sherpas grew, an increasing number of them moved away to pursue their education as a route to safer, more stable careers. This led to a second wave of Sherpas coming to Darjeeling from Nepal. This more recent history is embodied by Phurba, Purandare and Balsavar's trekking guide during some of their visits. Phurba and his peers continue to advance their guiding skills in the most progressive ways available to them, learning the basics from the HMI and then more modern techniques from their contacts in Nepal.

The stories of the Sherpas progress through to recent decades and the present day, and it becomes apparent that the client base of supported expeditions is changing, along with the roles of the Sherpas. There are now many more Indian and Chinese mountaineering parties, reflecting the significant economic growth of these two countries and perhaps the waning influence of Western countries on the leadership and outcomes of Himalayan mountaineering. Today Sherpas play a far more active role in the planning, guiding and climbing aspects of commercial expeditions. They are also, of course, making their own expeditions and developing new routes. *Headstrap* shows us these changes through the modern-day stories of a new generations of Sherpas, including Lhakpa Tsering and Dawa Norbu Sherpa.

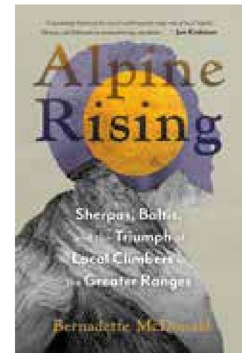
Mountains and mountaineering have for a long time inspired literature, and we should not be surprised that the increased autonomy of the Sherpas and their contemporaries in other parts of the Himalaya is also bringing forth new work. *Headstrap* is one of a number of recently published such books.

It can be argued that Western mountaineering literature has reflected the narrow, rationalist view of mountains as being there to be scaled, conquered in some way. *Headstrap* is something quite different. While of course it discusses the Darjeeling Sherpas' mountaineering achievements, it goes broader, telling us of their lives and culture, making for a rich and absorbing read. As Katie Ives writes in the book's foreword:

'This collection – along with other books by or about expedition workers – represents far more than a crucial way of filling gaps in the historical record. It is also a call to action for more writers, editors, publishers, and readers to join a larger reckoning and reenvisioning of what mountain literature has been, should have been, and might yet become.'

As mountain literature continues to diversify, books such as *Headstrap* are more than playing their part, they are showing us the way.

Heather Dawe



Alpine Rising
Sherpas, Baltis, and the Triumph of Local Climbers in the Greater Ranges.
Bernadette McDonald
Mountaineers Books, 2024, 272pp, £24.95

'Mountaineering differs from other sports in one important aspect. A man cannot obtain a reputation at cricket or football by hiring professionals to play for him.'

This observation, made in 1929 by Aleister Crowley, shows how little has changed in the near century since it was written. It is a universally accepted truth that too many modern clients, led to the top of the world by local guides, have blogged their way to fame without crediting their leaders. A hundred years after Crowley, Bernadette McDonald's latest oeuvre goes some way towards correcting the record.

McDonald sets out to show the lives, culture and history of those who have helped, supported and increasingly (especially in modern times) organised and led expeditions to their own countries.

The story opens with the first winter ascent of Pakistan's highest mountain by ten Nepali climbers. Nine Sherpas and one Magar. In this book about local climbers, opening with an ascent by a scratch team composed entirely of foreigners is, well, slightly ironic. Whether that irony is intentional or not I cannot tell, but it will not have been lost on the Pakistani climbing community. Having said that, McDonald relates the winter ascent of K2 well. Triumph and tragedy, the story is a page turner.

The following chapters bring old friends to readers of this journal. Here we meet again the 'Darjeeling Tigers' of the '30s. The names are familiar;

Ang Tharkay associated with Shipton, Pasang Kikuli who died on K2, Pasang Dawa Lama and many others fill the early pages. (Though in the case of Pasang Dawa Lama it would have been nice to see a mention of his role in the magnificent 1937 first ascent of Chomolhari.)

In the central chapters the chronicle continues with a catalogue of names previously hidden from history. Due to local conventions, many of these are similar. Alis, Baigs, Nimas, Mingmas and Dawas pepper the text to such an extent that it would be helpful to have them listed separately. Theirs is an interesting story that McDonald is to be commended for bringing to the page.

The rise of local commercial outfits in later chapters is filled with Pakistani and Nepali climbers who have now become household names; Nimsdai, Mingma G, Ali Sadpara, Little Karim and others. Many of these Nepali mountaineers have now qualified as IFMGA guides and the book argues that Himalayan climbing finds itself on the same trajectory as guiding in the Alps, which also began its life with the evolving role of local porters.

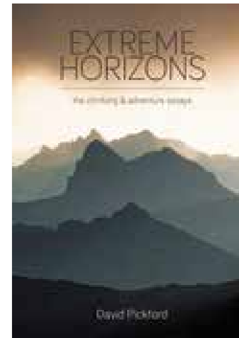
There are currently 67 IFMGA mountain guides from Nepal. This is excellent news for the local communities, but the situation is slightly more complicated than the book describes. The Nepali guides do not do the ski tests, and so their qualification does not permit them to guide worldwide as is the case with their international colleagues. It would have been good to have seen the implications of this correctly laid out here.

If I have a major complaint with the book, it is embodied by its sub-title, *'… the Triumph of Local Climbers in the Greater Ranges'*. For geographers, 'Greater Ranges' refers to more than the Himalayan Chain, while 'local climbers' implies more than Nepal and Pakistan. Here there is nothing of the Andes or Alaskan/Yukon massifs, while Indian and Tibetan climbers are all but absent from the account. This could be because Tibetans and Indians play a smaller role in the Himalayan story, but it could also be caused by an absence of relevant collaborators. Like gaps in the fossil record, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.

At the same time, this narrower view, is also part of the book's strength. McDonald's research benefits greatly from her collaboration with Saqlain Muhammad of Pakistan and Sareena Rai of Nepal. These two contributors interviewed most of the living subjects in their local languages and translated the results into English. The tight focus on these two communities adds rich detail to the story. Perhaps more detail than would have been possible with many more translators or by the author working alone in a second or third intermediate language.

I would not want my reservations, which are very slight, to overshadow the value of this book. They are the result of a reviewer adding more pencil marks to questions than to plaudits. Let there be no doubt, this subject matter is very important and a book of this pedigree on the topic has been a long time coming, not to say overdue. It is high time the local climbers claimed their rightful place in the limelight. Through her detailed research McDonald has done a commendable job of shining that light on those long overlooked by our histories.

Victor Saunders



Extreme Horizons
The Climbing & Adventure Essays
David Pickford
Monograph Media, 2023, 372pp, £29.95

Right in the middle of this fascinating book Dave Pickford gives us an essay on the evolution and current state of the climbing guidebook, in part lamenting the loss of a 'tradition of deliberately vague route descriptions … rooted in the idea that too much information about a climb reduces the adventure it might offer.' We're all familiar with the modern idiom of colourful photo topos and, of course, with the evolving potential of continuously updated online route directories which have displaced this tradition. (His totemic example of the perfect guidebook is *North Devon and Cornwall* (1988) – for me it's the wonderfully quirky *South Devon and Dartmoor* (1995) with its psychedelic marginalia). His ask of a great climbing guidebook is that it is 'not just a tool. It should also be a source of inspiration, a looking glass, a kaleidoscope of dreams through which we might project and realise our own most cherished ambitions.' In many senses, this often dreamlike and necessarily fragmentary collection of Pickford's writings is exactly that.

Every piece was once a magazine article, mostly in outdoor publications like *Climb* and *Alpinist*, occasionally and quite unexpectedly in less obvious periodicals like *Esquire*. Decanted from those glossy pages, they inhabit a weighty hardback volume no longer accompanied by the eye-catching colour photos that must have adorned them in the magazines. You may, like me, half remember reading some of them but the associated images have faded from memory.

In this collection those glossy colour layouts have given way to judiciously placed black and white title and end pieces. Appropriately, an essay at the very heart of the book details the history of climbing photography, noting to begin with how, in the 1820s, Nicéphore Niépce produced the world's first permanent photograph at around the same time that Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote his epochal account of descending Broad Stand. The interplay of photography, writing, climbing and adventure is one of the main planks of Pickford's thinking. He's fascinated by all 'fleeting ideograms of the vertical world' from the palaeolithic cave paintings of Lascaux to the heavily curated feeds of his Instagram contemporaries.

It isn't all climbing, by the way. Pickford is an accomplished SUP (Stand Up Paddle) boarder and a section of the book called 'Voyages' engagingly describes various ambitious crossings – for instance from Guernsey to Sark and across the Minch from the Inner to the Outer Hebrides, averaging three knots as he vectors across enormous tidal flows with their large overfalls, eddies and standing waves.

A third strand of essays called 'Journeys' takes the reader all over South

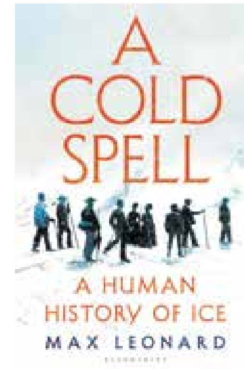
East Asia, India, Tierra del Fuego and Sicily, sometimes by motorbike (either on an extraordinarily resilient Russian-made Minsk or on the classic Royal Enfield of modern Indian legend). It concludes with a meditation on the commitment and risk undertaken by ancient Polynesian navigators, contrasting that with a critique of the 'safety-industrial complex' we inhabit in the present day. It's a theme Pickford alights on more than once, "safetyism" as a moral value and the erosion of risk as a tool for enabling us to properly function as human beings. I'm torn. As a trade unionist, safety seems to me absolutely paramount. Even as a climber, although I accept that we have to leave many layers of safety behind, it makes no sense to me to abandon measures that you can climb with efficiently. But Pickford, judging by the accomplishments he (modestly) refers to, is a much stronger and more accomplished climber and risk-taker than me. Early in the book he describes a youthful soloing binge at Bosigran that will make your hair stand on end. Now in mid-life, he has withdrawn from soloing almost entirely and, tempering his provocations about safetyism, he wisely cites the American sociologist Diane Vaughan on her theory of the 'normalisation of deviance,' the 'process by which we do something that does not follow the accepted safety protocol (like climbing without a rope), which we get away with. Then, believing it's safe to make the same safety shortcut a second time, we do it again. Repeat this process, and something is almost certain to go wrong.'

The fourth and final chapter, 'Perspectives', draws together themes that have lined the more narrative pieces. Pickford's preoccupations, of climbing as a paradigm of the human condition, a sacred experience that has saved his life, a gift, a political and economic freedom, all coalesce. He even toys with the concept of climbing as a colonial act, pushing his self-awareness out of the comfort zone. He cross-references his thinking with an extraordinary spectrum of established writers, above all Socrates with his dying axiom that the unexamined life is not worth living, but also Shakespeare, Larkin and Thesiger, contemporaries like Tristan Gooley, thinkers like Joseph Campbell, other poets like George Mackay Brown, and he even exposes the famous 'Hemingway' quotation about bullfighting, motor-racing and mountaineering as actually emanating from the pen of Barnaby Conrad.

His meditations and achievements transport the reader from Lundy to Lofoten, across the American West, over Zanskar, from the Cuillin to Kyrgyzstan and all the way to Tierra del Fuego. It's dizzying. Pickford has adventured in at least sixty countries (and could allow a little more self-examination on the ever-challenging question of environmental sustainability).

This is an absorbing and frequently dazzling collection from one of the great adventure writers of the present day. Anyone who cares about climbing literature will find it essential reading.

Nick Simons



A Cold Spell
A Human History of Ice
Max Leonard
Bloomsbury, 2023, 320pp, £20

In 1910, four years before he was shot through the forehead defending Paris from the German army, the poet and essayist Charles Péguy composed perhaps his most famous line in an essay on Charles Dreyfus and the souring of progressive optimism in France. 'Everything begins in mysticism,' he wrote in *Notre Jeunesse*, 'and ends in politics.'

It's hard to think of a neater example of this maxim than Mount Everest, especially in this year of Mallory's centenary. The fascination that surrounds his disappearance pursuing 'the wildest dream' is flavoured with mysticism but the modern mountain is all about the opposite: balance sheets and sovereignty.

Max Leonard, in this light-footed, well-written and often fascinating cultural history of ice, uses Peguy's aphorism (misattributed to another of Peguy's works) to introduce a chapter he titles 'The Buccaneers'. It opens at the tail end of the 16th century with the Dutch explorer William Barentsz, for whom the sea is named, living in a hut on the sea ice surrounding the archipelago of Novaya Zemlya in the Russian Arctic. Polar bears have taken up residence in the ruins of his trapped ship and to keep active he and his men are out on the frozen ocean playing colf (or kolf), the Dutch game that may have been the origin of golf.

It sounds romantic, if perilous, but their motivation was commercial: to discover the north-east passage to the Orient, a faster trading route that held the promise of immense wealth. Finding the north-east passage, and its north-west equivalent, became an obsession that somehow transcended its mercantile origins. Half a century before, England's first significant joint-stock company, the 'Mystery, Company, and Fellowship of Merchant Adventurers for the Discovery of Unknown Lands', had been established to the same ends. The adventurers were, of course, venture capitalists, but adventure was their business.

Leonard's purpose, I think, is to explain how ice, with its strangeness, its mystery, its unusual qualities (it floats on its liquid form, for example), captures this paradox and how ice brings us close to the limits of ourselves as a species to shape us culturally. He opens the book in the Chauvet cave of the Ardèche in southern France with Europe's human population under pressure from advancing ice. By the time these remarkable works were painted, humans had already been living north of the Arctic Circle for thousands of years. The cooling climate though was forcing people to move and consequently, as the argument goes, our culture became more dynamic and creative.

Leonard also speculates about humanity's first encounter with ice and how strange that must have been, comparing it to the delight we feel as children

when we first experience snow. He doubts this happened in Africa, where there was a lot more glacial ice than there is now. Peak bagging, he argues, only happened much later and early humans had better things to do.

I'm not so sure. Humans are unique in their ability to reason their way through new environments and if there was any possible advantage to visiting an African glacier then it would have been done. I suspect our relationship with ice is older than we can so far prove. Leonard's crisp and fascinating summary of the artefacts found with Ötzi the Iceman, who lived in a much later period, explains how it was a miracle anything of him was preserved at all. What else might hide behind an absence of evidence? Leonard himself quotes Thomas Browne: 'Large are the treasures of oblivion.'

The first written descriptions of the frozen sea came from the Greek adventurer Pytheas, born in Marseille in around 350 BCE, whose work we know only from secondary sources since it has been lost. Fridtjof Nansen acknowledged that Pytheas had set 'his mark more or less upon all that was known of the farthest north for the next thousand or fifteen hundred years.' It was the lure of wealth that sent European sailors, on the threshold of colonial conquest, back into the far north.

Many more aspects of our relationship with ice come under Leonard's inquisitive eye: food preservation and ice houses, the oldest of which date back thousands of years to ancient Mesopotamia, the New England ice trade and the technology that made it viable, how the discovery of mammoths frozen in the tundra undermined the Bible, the birth of glaciology, the history of ice skating, experiments in chemical cooling, using ice for anaesthesia and the haunting work of Christian Wilhelm Braune, about whom I knew nothing. His *Atlas of Topographical Anatomy* relied on frozen cadavers and a very sharp saw to provide cross-sections of the human body which were then drawn. Now, of course, we have PET scanners.

The conflation of medical advances and Romanticism's discovery of the glaciated Alps reached its apotheosis in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Leonard is especially good here. Freud later tried to argue, quite unconvincingly, that the arrival of the last glacial period had made humanity generally anxious. Shelley tapped a more promising vein to create 'a parable of uneasiness about new technologies and scientific methods.' Science offered a demonstrable explanation for the world that removed the need for God. What if the promise of eternal life was just one more story?

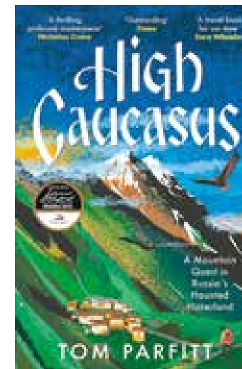
Just as the exploration of space gave artists like Stanley Kubrick and David Bowie new perspectives, ice gave Mary Shelley an equally austere backdrop on which to project the concerns of mankind. 'In Shelley's tale,' Leonard writes, 'it [ice] is a radically disruptive substance, straddling the border between the natural and unnatural, beauty and horror. And the more I looked into the history of ice and the body, the more this seemed to be carried over into reality.'

Alpinism's Golden Age makes a cursory appearance, which is a shame because had he dug deeper into the new technology mountaineering required Leonard would have had interesting things to say about a new human perspective on the medium he's exploring. Leonard also offers a version of the Alpine Club, although mostly to illustrate the point that early female alpinists were marginalised and discredited. That's true of course, but the Alpine Club was no more misogynistic that any other mid-Victorian institution Leonard mentions; in fact, female alpinists got a better welcome from at least some members of the Club than wider society.

He doesn't help his case by quoting a passage of Leslie Stephen that is satirical and not meant to be taken literally. I guess Victorian jokes don't travel well. Stephen's daughter Virginia Woolf wrote a perceptive essay about her father, and how she had the run of his library. Leonard also claims that Alpine guides were somehow written out of history, which is simply wrong. They may not always have been given enough credit, but half an hour flicking through early editions of the *Alpine Journal* would have disabused him.

There are a few moments in the book where I thought more might be said, for example about Leonardo da Vinci's exploration on Monte Rosa and about the work of American archaeologist and anthropologist Johan Reinhard, who isn't even mentioned in relation to the Inca ice mummies he helped discover. But such lacunae are inevitable in a book of this scale and ambition, a book that seems to pack a great deal into its moderate length, of mysticism and politics and much in between. It sits favourably alongside Francis Spufford's *I May Be Some Time* and Charlie English's *The Snow Tourist*.

Ed Douglas



High Caucasus
Tom Parfitt
Headline, 2023, 352pp, £12.99

'… tiptoeing through a land drenched in sorrow and blood.'

This is not the language of a standard mountaineering narrative. Indeed *High Caucasus*, despite its title and the snowy peaks on the dust jacket, is not a mountaineering book at all. Tom Parfitt is certainly on an adventure though, and his account makes for a sobering education if you're thinking of taking off to anywhere between the Black Sea and the Caspian.

Elbrus may hover on the horizon, but the challenge for Parfitt is closer to hand: traversing not just cols and foot hills, but ethnic and religious faultlines, negotiating potentially hostile borders, and, at a deeper personal level, laying to rest the ghosts of an observed slaughter.

Parfitt, as a Moscow-based foreign correspondent, witnessed the September 2004 siege at School Number One in Beslan, North Ossetia. Chechen and Ingush militants took more than 1,100 people captive. In a bloody climax, when Russian commandos stormed the school, 334 hostages died, more than half of them children. For years, Parfitt remained haunted by the

sight of a woman falling to the ground, consumed by grief, on learning that her child had been killed.

Starting at the Black Sea resort of Sochi, Parfitt walks 1,000 miles through seven Russian republics to Derbent, by the Caspian Sea in Dagestan. The names, if familiar at all, carry echoes of news reports; troubles in faraway places with strange sounding names: Abkhazia, Ingushetia, Chechnya … Yet it is also a region of rare natural beauty where Parfitt experiences generous hospitality in greater measure than suspicion and obstruction.

He's in search of 'personal peace', confronting the trauma of Beslan and his unease at the 'hack-pack' life of a foreign correspondent through connection with history, people and place. But one wonders how much lasting solace Parfitt actually found. Hillside reveries are disturbed by reminders that he is wandering through an Arcadia born in waves of terror: deportations and ethnic cleansing.

One afternoon, skirting Elbrus, he lies down on a slope covered in wild flowers and abuzz with insects. He thinks of Tolstoy's hero Olenin in *The Cossacks* and the 'strange feeling of careless joy and love for everything' that came over Olenin in a wild, sun-filled glade. 'On that slope, baking among the flowers and grasses, I too experienced a moment of bliss, the heat a palliating force,' writes Parfitt.

Yet barely a sentence later the narrative takes a darker turn. On the next pass he meets a shepherd watching his flock. Parfitt hears a tale that embodies much of the pain of the region. The shepherd was born in 1954 in faraway Kazakhstan, his family, along with thousands of other Balkars and Karachays, having been brutally uprooted by Stalin.

Parfitt descends from the pass to the village of Bezingi, territory familiar to British mountaineers in years long gone. Albert Mummery was disturbed from sleep hereabouts when a goat jumped on to his tent. Decades later, Chris Brasher was to reflect on the more profound disturbances Stalin wrought on the people of Bezingi. The Soviet authorities tried to hush the deportation of the Balkars; Brasher, on an expedition to the Caucasus in 1958, was told that the old settlement of Bezingi had been devastated by a mud avalanche. But Brasher saw no evidence of a landslide and noted that 'it seemed far more likely that the village had been ransacked and destroyed when the inhabitants had been evicted under conditions of terrible hardship'.

Traversing the Caucasus makes for a long walk and Parfitt has plenty of time to interrogate his motives and delve into his mental interior. Witness to horrors though he undoubtedly has been, he is wary of adopting a look of inviolable seriousness. Once or twice, he says, 'I had caught myself in this pose: the grave emissary of odious things, the noble observer who could shock you with a tale of torture – before hastening back to Moscow and the latest party.'

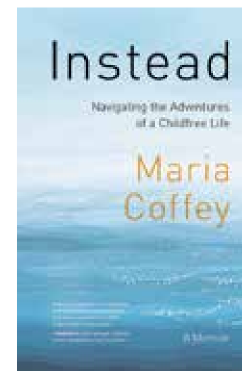
Or, he wonders, was the attraction of the Caucasus simply as his 'playground – a mere provider of thrills?' The illumination Parfitt brings to this little understood region suggests the answer is an emphatic 'No'. But for climbers, past and present, it is a more loaded question. The Victorian

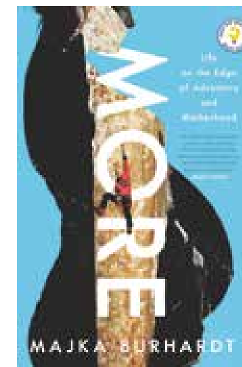
Leslie Stephen, a previous editor of this journal, as was Freshfield, famously entitled his classic account of adventure in the Alps, *The Playground of Europe*. And that is how the Alps and other mountains of the world continue to be regarded and treated today – our 'playground'.

What, however, captivates Parfitt above all on his hazardous hike is not the terrain – 'throat-tighteningly awesome' though he finds it – but the sheer grandeur of humanity, particularly a loyalty to place, a noble perseverance despite poverty and oppression.

High Caucasus, powerful, yet occasionally wry, and far from self-important, wonderfully bears out a gem of epigrammatic wisdom from the iconoclast Werner Herzog: 'The world reveals itself to those who travel on foot.' But, like Parfitt, one's eyes must be open to more than summits.

Stephen Goodwin





Instead
Maria Coffey
Rocky Mountain Books, 2023, 293pp, £19.99

More
Majka Burhardt
Pegasus Books, 2023, 336pp, £19.99

To many readers of this journal, Maria Coffey will need no introduction. An award-winning writer of 13 books, a number related to mountaineering, Trustee and Chair of the Boardman-Tasker Trust, she was the girlfriend of Joe Tasker when he died on Chomolungma with Pete Boardman in 1982.

While Tasker and the UK climbing scene of the 1970s and '80s have a presence in *Instead*, this is a book only loosely related to mountaineering. But that does not mean that it is unsuited to this publication. The subject matter of the book and the ways in which Coffey has chosen to live her life have relevance for a large number of us. The book's title refers to the choice Coffey and her husband Dag Goering take; deciding not to have children in favour of a life full of adventure.

Early in *Instead*, Coffey discusses the impact of Tasker's death on the ways in which she could allow herself to fall in love again, to become dependent on others in this way. This impact cannot be understated, she recognises the fear she'd have for her own children.

Coffey also understood the ways in which having children can fundamentally change a lifestyle. She recounts a time in her early forties, Goering still keen for a child (he was convinced that having one would not impact their

lifestyle of global travel and adventure), when they visited friends who themselves were determined to continue to travel to the Himalaya when they had a baby. Instead, they were focussed on the infant's basic needs, fascinated and absorbed by their baby. Global travel plans had fallen by the wayside and they were planning for another, a sibling for their first-born. From the outside looking in, it can be quite shocking to see how having a baby can change people.

After this and a number of other similar experiences, Dag realised that their adventurous life together and children were likely incompatible, coming to agree with Coffey that they should remain as they are. This decision made, the couple also agreed that, if they were not going to become parents, then they should always pursue the adventurous life, not find themselves pandering to steady well-paid jobs and a beckoning easy retirement. Instead they would constantly push themselves to live a riskier life with lots of travel and exploration in wild places.[1]

Much of *Instead* is made up of stories of Coffey and Goering living such times together – running their adventure company, kayaking the Vietnamese coast, trips to Kenya, India and more – along with reflections on the relationships of family and friends.

So, the book is about far more than not having children. Coffey's writing is thoughtful, empathetic and determined. Her explorations of the UK climbing scene of the 1970s and 1980s are erudite and thought-provoking, an alternative lens to the one used by other chroniclers of the period. And Coffey's descriptions of her relationship with her own mother, how it changes through the years, as she gains greater confidence to assert herself, are considered.

There was an interesting parallel in the analysis of a mother-daughter relationship in Majka Burhardt's *More*, an account by Burhardt of her decision to have a baby with her husband, Peter Doucette, and their experiences of the changes this brings to their lifestyle and relationship. Burhardt's awareness of her own mother alters, as she helps Burhardt adapt to the huge life changes motherhood introduces.

More begins with Burhardt, a professional climber, mountain guide and CEO of a non-governmental organisation, recounting her early pregnancy through to birthing by caesarean. These are intense times. Burhardt knew her life was about to change in fundamental, at times tremendously hard to handle ways. But she had realised she wanted a child more than not wanting to have to cope with these changes. When she found out she was expecting twins, she experienced even greater apprehensions.

I would have welcomed reading these chapters when I was pregnant with my first daughter. It would have helped me to feel better, knowing there was at least one other woman out there who had been through the same emotional wrangling as me. (Of course many other women do, but it didn't feel like that to me at the time.)

1. As I was writing this review, I discussed doing so with one of my friends who has two children. Alongside them and her husband she's had all kinds of adventures in many different mountainous parts of the world – trekking in Greenland, touring New Zealand, trips to the Alps and many others. My friend made the point that this does not have to be a binary choice.

Like Burhardt, I had concluded I wanted children more than I valued the freedom to go to the mountains whenever I wanted. But that did not make living through these changes easy.

This is brave writing from Burhardt, similar to the ways in which Coffey's writing is brave. Society expects motherhood to come naturally to all women, that the associated lifestyle changes should be accepted with ease. They both show us that this is not the case. They also show us that this is okay, which will come as a relief (and in some ways a guide) to many of the climbers and adventurers who read these books, wondering if parenthood is something they really want to pursue.

When Burhardt has her babies her writing suddenly isn't about her anymore. Two beings have arrived on the scene that have blown her mind with the intense love she feels for them. Her life transforms to one of breast-feeding new-borns (she has an incredible photograph of feeding them both at the same time, one baby tucked under each arm), nappy changing, cooing endlessly, being overwhelmed with emotion and intensely tired, grabbing the odd bit of sleep here and there, wondering if life is ever going to return to normal but also realising that her 'normality' has fundamentally changed.

Burhardt captured the events described in *More* in an audio diary, its retelling on the page is so honest, true to the seismic changes having a baby (or, in this case, babies) brings to the mother, particularly in the early days.

Her husband is supportive and empathetic throughout. Like Burhardt, he's also a mountain guide and climber, leading to tensions when he's away working or when he seeks to go on his own climbing trips.

Burhardt herself is torn between being around to nurse her babies and getting away guiding and climbing. She also yearns to be more hands-on in her NGO day-job. While she understands Doucette needs to guide to earn money and also wants to climb for himself, there is a natural resentment as she cannot do these things herself quite so easily. Here on the page are the tensions felt by a highly accomplished female climber and corporate strategist left at home holding the babies. But this has been experienced before by so many.

For generations we've had mountain and climbing books, the vast majority of which were written by men, describing their adventures scaling rock faces and reaching summits. Parenthood was touched upon, perhaps a recognition that it resets many climbers' levels of risk-taking, but until now we've not had in-depth descriptions of the ways motherhood and parenthood change a climber's life, and that it's ok to choose either way. These books are two of a number that have recently been published with such subject matter. They have needed to be written for a long time.

During the time I was thinking about and writing this review, I was also reading *I'm Mostly Here To Enjoy Myself* by Glynnis MacNicol. This is a book that explores individual female identity and the challenges of living in a society that does not readily enable women to explore and understand themselves. MacNicol shows us the importance of this understanding; that it enables women to live more empowered and contented lives.

Unmarried with no children and in her mid-forties, MacNicol's book is an account of a month she spent in Paris – August 2021 – after living though the pandemic lockdowns alone in her New York apartment. The account is all about MacNicol indulging herself, craving human contact after so much time on her own. She recounts brief – but intense – sexual liaisons she experiences with, mainly younger, Parisian men she hooks up with on French dating apps. MacNicol also indulges other desires: riding a Vélib through the city at night, late lunches and nights out with her network of female friends, wandering around the Louvre, unusually empty of people because of the pandemic. While some of the main events in this book recount the author enjoying sex on her own terms, *I'm Mostly Here To Enjoy Myself* is about much more than that. MacNicol uses all of these indulging experiences to springboard into an exploration of her own self, her identity.

While motherhood can in some ways define us, it is by no means the whole of our identity. And that is one of the key thoughts I came away with after reading these three books. Coffey and Burhardt's discussions are fundamentally an exploration of the (potential and actual) impact of children on their lives, and of how they live given the choices they have made.

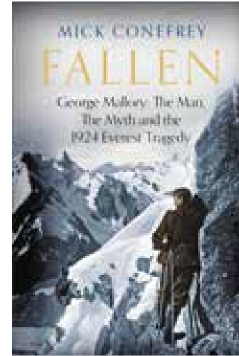
I would argue that this misses a fundamental point. While it's probably the most lifestyle-defining decision any woman makes (if she has the option to make this choice), it is not a reflection of the given woman's self – surely that's the same whether or not she has children.

Having children can make it harder for a woman to discover her own identity but I think it's still possible. While motherhood generally slows and limits the accessibility of adventure (well recognised as a route to self-discovery), it does not need to inhibit self-discovery – this can be achieved in other ways (not necessarily through self-indulgence in Paris, though it worked for MacNicol).

Instead and *More* are important contributions to the mountain and adventure writing genre. And both writers are pushing boundaries in their writing, something the genre needs such protagonists to continue to do as it becomes more diverse.

But maybe the question women should be asking, beyond the decision of whether or not to have children, is how best we can connect with ourselves to explore and understand our own individual identities. As MacNicol concludes in her book's closing chapters, if more women managed to do this, there probably wouldn't be a patriarchy.

Heather Dawe



Fallen
George Mallory: The Man, The Myth and the 1924 Everest Tragedy
Mick Conefrey
Allen & Unwin, 2024, 352pp, £22

My favourite books as a small boy were peopled by the likes of Drake and Raleigh, Franklin who disappeared, Scott and Shackleton who failed gloriously, and of course Mallory and Irvine. Not surprisingly the piquancy of 'did they or didn't they' has remained with me ever since, culminating when as a mountaineer myself I came to grips with Everest and soon learned to appreciate the pressures and problems to be overcome in any attempt to climb so large a mountain. Obviously it has remained in the mind of the general non-mountaineering public too, for over the years dozens of books, myriad other publications, films and TV features have postulated on the subject. The discovery of his body in 1999 only added the finishing touches to yet further biographies of George Mallory as an interesting man and a notable alpinist. Nevertheless, one crucial question is still unanswered.

But this book is not a biography of a man but rather a detailed report of a great enterprise that caught the imagination of Britain in the still wounded aftermath of the Great War. It is virtually a narrative diary, covering three expeditions, those of 1921, 1922, and 1924, their antecedents, their planning, their politics, their execution and their run-down, each in great, blow-by-blow depth.

These three attempts on Everest were organised by a Committee composed of senior members of both the Royal Geographical Society and the Alpine Club, the former celebrated 'explorers', ageing and seemingly self-appointed, the latter younger, active alpinists of 'independent spirit', and presided over by the Committee Secretary, arch-bureaucrat Arthur Hinks, who was neither and who seemed to delight in penny-pinching and obstruction. A sure formula for discord in the buttoned-up mores of the time.

Not surprisingly the RGS comes out badly to modern eyes and provides a lesson in how not to run a large expedition.

The first Everest Expedition was a reconnaissance in force, the latter two full-blown summit attempts. And of course George Mallory, a young, handsome, newly married Edwardian schoolmaster and ex-First World War Artillery officer, an extremely capable – indeed driven – rock climber and alpinist, to some even a 'Galahad' despite his flawed character, emerges as the natural climbing leader and star of the show.

Painstaking research, the recent discovery of further contemporary correspondence and the release of hitherto private papers has enabled Mick Conefrey to recount the day to day, sometimes even hour-by-hour detail of these expeditions. While obviously this is frequently repetitive, tedious even,

it may nevertheless help the reader to share the sheer physical effort and mental commitment required for every mile of the gruelling and debilitating approach march across Tibet and every foot of ascent, often in fierce weather and without the modern equipment, clothing, food and medical attention that we take for granted today.

After 1924 the Mount Everest Committee is wound down and only resurrected to organise the subsequent official expeditions of 1933, 1935 and 1936, each in its turn a gallant failure despite narrowly breaking the altitude records of the 1920s. But this time only the salient events are covered, in as much that they impinge on the Mallory/Irvine disappearance: the finding of the tattered remains of high camps, the recovery of minor artefacts and the discovery of Irvine's axe for instance, and the suggestion of the Great (or Norton's) Couloir as an alternative to the Second Step. Thus does the *did-they-didn't-they* conundrum come to a head.

The short final section covers the events of 1999 and the subsequent expeditionary searches and discreet enquiries into Chinese evidence. Especially intriguing, but still providing no answer, is a short note that came to light among Frank Smythe's papers when in 2013 his son, Tony, published his definitive biography, *My Father Frank*. It appeared that in 1936, searching the slopes below the Yellow Band through a telescope, Frank – a photographer with a trained eye and 20/20 vision – had seen what was unmistakably a body. It had to be one or other of the missing climbers. Confiding later only in Norton, it was decided to keep the secret and not disabuse the national myth of '… going strongly for the top …'

There are several nicely reproduced period photographs within the text and two horrible topographical sketches showing camp sites and body locations, an important task far better handled with appropriate photographs of which many are now available.

Though hardly bedside reading, this is a valuable book for the Everest scholar, well written and expertly crafted. But had Mallory and Irvine returned safely though unsuccessfully on 8 June 1924, would you be reading it?

John Cleare

Behind Everest
Ruth Mallory's Story
Kate Nicholson
Pen & Sword, 2024, 228pp, £22

There are only two known photographs of George Mallory together with his wife Ruth. One, recently discovered, shows them as indistinct figures sitting on a wall in the loggia of The Holt, their home in Godalming, Surrey. The other, which is more familiar and appears on the cover of this enthralling book, shows George in his army uniform, an incipient moustache on his upper lip. Ruth is seated to

his right, looking directly at the camera with a beguiling half-smile.

It is a measure of the details the author Kate Nicholson has unearthed for her enthralling biography of Ruth, *Behind Everest*, that she names the photographer, Adrian Harding, describes his studio, his camera, the film, the lighting and the stool that his subjects sat on. She also identifies the significance of the occasion. It is May 1916, and George is soon to depart to the Western Front. She tells us that George gained 'almost childish pleasure' from wearing his rough serge uniform with its brass-buttoned epaulets, depicted in the photograph.

She notes, from Ruth's wispy hair, that she must have washed it for the occasion. It is also a moment of burgeoning danger, one that Ruth is struggling with: 'I always knew that it was absolutely necessary to us that you should go.' It presages a ten-year marriage interrupted first, by war, then by George's three Everest expeditions – with the dramatic irony that entails, as the readers know how this will end, while the participants do not.

Other biographies have described Ruth before, but none have placed her front and centre, as Nicholson does. She portrays Ruth with insight and understanding, as well as locating her in the context of the times, from the arts and political movements she espoused to the impact of the First World War.

Even in such a crowded biographical space, Nicholson has disinterred new documents and photographs, and has conducted the first interviews with descendants of key figures from Ruth's life. Nicholson says she has used 'narrative non-fiction techniques' to immerse the reader in Ruth's life and they work to great effect. The book has a radical structure, moving between historical scenes and the present day, as Nicholson relates how she placed herself in Ruth's position, escorting the reader around her homes, learning to climb so that she can follow Ruth's routes. The outcome is an absorbing mix of research and imagination, a meta exercise in double empathy: we feel what Nicholson feels and from that extrapolate to Ruth's feelings too.

Ruth was born into a family that Nicholson describes as 'Arts and Craft royalty': her father an architect, her mother an embroiderer. They lived in a stylish mansion in Godalming, which is where, in 1914, Ruth first met George, a Cambridge graduate who was teaching at nearby Charterhouse School. They fell in love on a visit to Italy with Ruth's parents and were married on 29 July, 1914 – just days before the start of the First World War.

At first George was prevented from joining up because, as a schoolteacher, he was in a reserved occupation. In 1916 he was commissioned into an artillery regiment and witnessed the slaughter at the battle of the Somme. His service was interrupted when he returned home for an operation on a leg injury caused by a climbing accident, but he was back in France at the time of the Armistice. Ruth gave birth to their first child, Claire, in 1915, and their second, Berridge in 1917. Throughout this period her voice is heard via the copious letters she wrote, often daily (and now accessible as digital versions in the archives of Magdalene College, Cambridge, together with George's letters.) In 1921, Ruth gave birth to their third child, John.

George was away for six months that year on the Everest reconnaissance. He returned in 1922 and again in 1924, disappearing high on the north ridge on June 8. Ruth learned of his presumed death in a telegram which reached her ten days later. Ruth is far less audible during this period as all but one of her letters to George have gone missing.

From that account, Nicholson has selected key scenes to bring alive. On 25 January 1921, Geoffrey Winthrop Young visits the Holt, with the aim of persuading George to join the impending Everest Reconnaissance. Ostensibly the decision was put to Ruth; but she had no real choice in the matter, and said that George should go. Nicholson takes us to Birkenhead for George's departure in February 1924. The expedition's liner is late in leaving and rather than wait, Ruth walks away from the quayside, making her own decision about when to say goodbye.

As well as such scenes from the marriage, Nicholson shows us Ruth forging her own paths. She learns to be a Montessori teacher, in the face of scepticism from George and outright opposition from her father, and argues that women should have the same educational opportunities as men. She designs and paints ceramics that are exhibited in London galleries. She is an enthusiast for the League of Nations and holds meetings for women at her parents' house to argue its cause. She considers herself a socialist, in line with the beliefs of the Arts and Crafts leader, William Morris. Following George's tutelage, she becomes an accomplished climber and in 1921 joins the newly formed all-women Pinnacle Club.

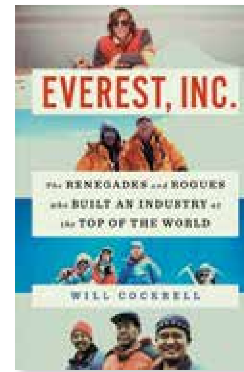
We also see Ruth in more intimate moments. She enjoys sex and writes sensual letters to George. She wanted children and is astounded by the love she felt for her first child, Claire. But she has a harrowing time when Claire is born, suffering a slow haemorrhage from which she nearly dies. She falls seriously ill, most likely from pneumonia, during the influenza epidemic that claimed so many lives immediately after the First World War: 'I had a lucky let-off,' she writes to George. 'It might easily have been worse.'

Nicholson confronts one of the controversies concerning the marriage, namely George's relations with other women. One was Stella Cobden-Sanderson, author of a letter found in George's jacket when his body was discovered in 1999; another was Marjorie Holmes, a Yorkshire teacher to whom George wrote in intimate terms in 1923 and 1924, revealed when her letters were sold at auction in 2015. Nicholson's discussion ties in with a second contentious issue, namely the disappearance of the letters Ruth wrote to her husband during the three Everest expeditions. In the single letter that has survived, Ruth apologises for having been 'rather cross and not nice'; in his reply, George acknowledges that they had been through 'a difficult time together.' Nicholson comes to a startling conclusion about the fate of the letters which (non-spoiler alert) I leave for readers to discover for themselves.

After George's death, and following 15 years as a widow, Ruth remarried in June 1939. Her second husband, Will Arnold-Foster, was a long-standing family friend, and they lived for a time in Cornwall. Ruth died of cancer in London in June 1942.

Nicholson's book follows her *Snow Widows*, published in 2022, which describes Captain Scott's fatal South Pole expedition of 1912 from the perspective of the five women who were left behind. It thus fits into a developing genre of relating the story of wives and partners who have largely been neglected by history. Nicholson hooks her readers into her quest for the whole Ruth, engaging them in her hopes and fears, offering a new take on her relationship with George, and presenting her as a full person in her own right: no longer behind, as intimated by the book's title, but centre stage.

Peter Gillman



Everest, Inc.
The renegades and rogues who built an industry at the top of the world
Will Cockrell
Gallery Books, 2024, 352pp, £20.00

I can hear the groans of readers as they see a review for yet another book about Mount Everest. Surely there can't be anything new to say about such a well-covered topic? Bear with me: this book is different. Indeed if you want to know what is happening on Everest today, and how it got this way, this is the book to read.

Since the first commercial and guided Everest expeditions in the late 1980s and early 1990s the story of Everest has been the story of the individuals and companies that have sprung up to service this growing market. *Everest, Inc.* is a detailed history of what happened to change the world's highest peak from an elusive goal achievable by only the very best climbers into a peak that is climbed by hundreds of inexperienced amateurs every year.

When I was first contacted to contribute to this book a few years ago I thought it sounded a worthy project, but I doubted that it would be a riveting read or find much of an audience. I am glad to have been proven wrong on both counts. Cockrell has interviewed more than 120 key participants, enabling him to produce the definitive history of Everest in the commercial era. What's more, his diligence as a researcher and skill as a writer have combined to produce a lively and entertaining read. The content is accessible to the public, but unlike other books of this ilk, there is very little that an experienced expedition climber will find to disagree with.

The great merit of this book is that it allows the key participants to describe their experiences and tell their stories without the author standing in judgement. Cockrell quotes protagonists with different views on the key issues without seeking to editorialise or draw conclusions. All mountaineers, whether they have personal experience of Everest or not, will have their own opinions on these issues. Readers may consider some of the views expressed misguided, naive or self-serving, but they are left to make those judgements for themselves without any steer from the author.

My own involvement in the Everest industry started in 1999 and, over the following 21 years, I led 13 expeditions to the world's highest mountain. I am now happy to consider myself retired from that part of my working life. I know all of the individuals quoted or referred to from my period on the mountain and was pleased to find their personalities and voices in tact in Cockrell's prose. I was also heartened to find that Cockrell had sought out the voices of native Nepali climbers to comment, alongside the western operators, on the major events that have shaped the mountain.

The industry started slowly during the 1980s with wealthy individuals funding expeditions led by experienced Himalayan mountaineers. Mostly these climbs did not go well for the amateur climbers but several of the experienced mountaineers had notable successes. American businessman Dick Bass reached the summit of Everest at his third attempt in 1985. The book detailing his odyssey to climb the seven summits, including Everest, created a 'bucket list' experience which, over subsequent decades, has seen thousands of hopefuls attempt to follow in his footsteps. 1990 saw the first publicly advertised Everest climb, interestingly via the north face and super couloir! In 1992 the first two successful guided Everest expeditions took clients to the summit on the same day.

In the following years, five companies established guided Everest climbs, taking about 150 paying clients. The summit success rate was a little over 30% and there were zero client fatalities. The events of 1996 changed everything. Eight climbers died on a single day and climbing Everest became headline news around the globe. Soon after, the bestselling book *Into Thin Air* was published and translated into dozens of languages. A popular IMAX film shot on Everest hit the market the following year. Suddenly millions of people around the world became aware that you could buy a place on an expedition to 'the roof of the world'. The nascent industry that had been feeling its way into existence saw client numbers increase steadily year on year in response to this glut of free publicity.

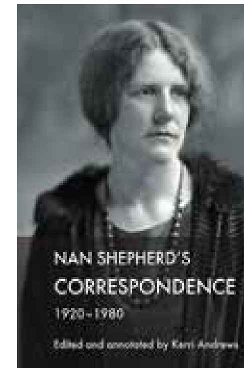
The established companies began to specialise. Some offered more services for higher prices while others opted for a lower margin, higher volume business model. New entrants joined the industry at both ends of the price scale. There were a few incidents where personal rivalries between guides or companies got a little unpleasant and the better organised expeditions with more resources often resented the low cost operators, pointing to their higher accident rates. Despite these issues, overall client numbers increased, summit success rates increased, accident rates stayed fairly low and there was a high degree of cooperation between all of the companies working on Everest. This 'golden age' of Everest guiding lasted almost 20 years.

Every foreigner who has climbed in Nepal is aware of the essential contribution of the Nepali mountain workers. While it is not entirely correct to use the term 'Sherpa' to describe this ethnically diverse group, it has become the common shorthand. For most of the history of mountaineering in Nepal, including Everest, the voices of local high altitude workers have been underrepresented in the narratives and in the industry. Over the years Nepali climbers have become more skilled in technical climbing and guiding techniques (including IFMGA accreditation) and business skills. It was inevitable that they would take a more leading role in the commercial activities on Everest at some point. However, three major events accelerated this process; a well-documented dispute between a small group of western climbers and a rope fixing team in 2013, a serac collapse in the Khumbu icefall in 2014 where 16 high altitude workers died, and the 2015 Nepal earthquake, which killed 19 people in Everest Base Camp.

For reasons explained in the book, the fallout from these traumatic events hastened the transition of the Everest guiding industry from being dominated by western companies with 'Sherpa' assistance to being run mostly by Nepali owned and operated companies. This has led to changes in the way that the majority of Everest expeditions are run that many older, western guides, including myself, are uncomfortable with.

The book however is more positive and upbeat on this development, with Cockrell ending the story to date on a sanguine note. My own views are more nuanced. The Swiss have built a successful industry around climbing on the Matterhorn, and similarly the French on Mont Blanc. There is no reason that a successful Everest industry should not contribute to the Nepali economy and society in a similar way. However, I fear that there will be many more avoidable deaths on Everest before the Nepali authorities implement adequate management and regulation of the companies who operate on their most iconic national resource.

David Hamilton



Nan Shepherd's Correspondence 1920-1980
Edited by Kerri Andrews
Edinburgh University Press, 2024, 344pp., £125

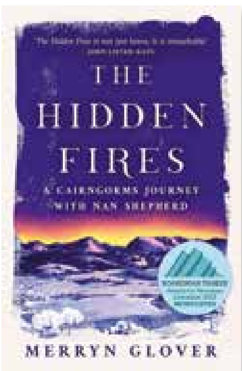
The revival of interest in the life and writing of Nan Shepherd continues, partly helped by the endorsement of Robert Macfarlane who has been instrumental in the republication of her poetry collection, *In The Cairngorms* ([1934] 2014), and who wrote a well-researched and perceptive Introduction to the Scottish publisher Canongate's 2011 edition of Shepherd's masterpiece *The Living Mountain*. In their Canongate Classics series the publisher has reprinted each of Shepherd's three novels, although, together with *The Living Mountain* these can also be bought in a single paperback volume, Canongate's *The Grampian Quartet*. There are also at least two recent selections of Shepherd's poetry and prose writings. In 2017 Charlotte Peacock made a huge contribution by publishing *Into The Mountain: A Life of Nan Shepherd*, now available in paperback. Most recently, my colleague Samantha Walton has shown how Shepherd anticipated the interconnected themes of current explorations in the environmental humanities in *The Living World: Nan Shepherd and*

Environmental Thought (2020), also now in paperback, which indicates publishers' confidence in Shepherd finding new readers in the twenty-first century.

Macfarlane's grandfather, Sir Edward Peck, a member of the AC, had a family cottage on the edge of the Cairngorms where young Robert spent his holidays. 'I thought that I knew the Cairngorms well,' he wrote in his Introduction to *The Living Mountain*, 'but Shepherd showed me my complacency. Her writing re-made my vision of these familiar hills. It taught me to see them, rather than just to look at them.' Macfarlane comes close to articulating the magical quality in Shepherd's writing when he says that in that book, 'intense empiricism is the first step to immanence'. In fact, *The Living Mountain* had been written by the mid-1940s, following what this correspondence reveals to be her literary celebrity of the 1930s. But in a crucial 1945 letter from Neil Gunn, to whose annual books Shepherd responded with great admiration, the difficulties of publishing *The Living Mountain* are outlined and the manuscript stayed in a drawer until its 1977 publication a few years before her death.

This volume of correspondence demonstrates what a rich literary life Nan Shepherd sustained, especially as a long-standing contributor and editor of the *Aberdeen University Review*. The 250 letters to and from Shepherd collected here by Kerri Andrews only serve to emphasise, as Andrews points out, the neglect of the women who played a full part in the 'Scottish Literary Renaissance' of the 1930s - until suddenly Nan Shepherd's image is to be found on the £5 note of the Royal Bank of Scotland. As Samantha Walton says, Shepherd's evocation of her intimate relationship with the Cairngorms is so marked by interconnectivity as to constitute a mode of 'ecstatic dwelling'. For those of us still catching up, Andrews' edition of these letters is a new enrichment concerning her literary life from one of our most remarkable writers about mountains.

Terry Gifford



The Hidden Fires
A Cairngorms Journey with Nan Shepherd
Merryn Glover
Polygon Books, 2023, 230pp, £10.99

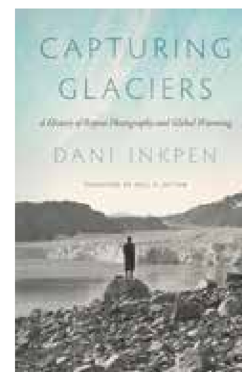
2024 saw the launch of a new play about Nan Shepherd, written with the assistance of Kerri Andrews, editor of her correspondence (reviewed above). *Nan Shepherd: Naked and Unashamed* is directed by Richard Baron, and co-produced by Pitlochry Festival Theatre and Firebrand Theatre Company. So it seems that there are many ways to celebrate the Scottish author, including a book about taking many journeys into the Cairngorms in search of what her writing actually means. Merryn Glover knows that Nan Shepherd said, 'To aim for the highest point is not the only way to climb a mountain'.

In twelve chapters, taking their titles from *The Living Mountain*, Glover, as writer-in-residence for Cairngorm National Park in 2019, began this book using Shepherd as her 'invisible friend: walking guide, writing tutor and fellow wonderer'. The result is not just an immensely readable book detailing a range of Cairngorm experiences, from wild swimming to birding, and from debating skiing infrastructure to bivvying alone for the first time, but a deep dive into Shepherd's language and philosophy with embodied understanding.

Born in Australia to a missionary family, much of Glover's childhood was spent in the Himalayan foothills of Nepal below Machapuchare, although she was sent to school at 7000 feet at the Indian hill station of Uttarakhand. In 1992, halfway through a round-the-world trip she was taken into the Cairngorms by Alistair, a doctor she had met in Nepal. By 2019 they have married and live in Speyside with two young boys. Light deprivation during Scottish winters are a mental and emotional problem, partly solved by a light box. In the chapter 'The Recesses', Glover, having been intimidated from swimming by a 'hard, cold' lochan in mid-summer, writes, 'Much of this journey is about relinquishing high ideals and befriending realities. About taking time in the recesses. They are the deep and hidden parts of the mountain […] We need also to dwell in our own recesses. To enter these places of mystery, the cloud of unknowing and the path of night, for they are the places of deep formation, of learning who we are and what we truly need' (78-9).

It is clear that Glover has not only learned from Shepherd, but is able to articulate in her own way an extension of her writing that has a direct and deep quality of its own. Glover concludes: 'I do not know if I will return to swim there, but I do know that I am changed. In this walking I have been washed by rain, shot through with light, battered by wind and hung out to dry […] As I walk home I am remade. The mountain returns the pieces of me one by one in the ptarmigan's croak and the taste of a clear burn; it repairs me in the flowering of a wild azalea and the gaze of a deer' (81). I hope that these quotations alone will tempt some readers into the regenerative journey of this illuminating book.

Terry Gifford



Capturing Glaciers
A History of Repeat Photography and Global Warming
Dani Inkpen
University of Washington Press, 2024, 270pp, £25.99

Many years ago (before digital photography was a thing) I recall a senior member of my university speaking about our collections at a retirement party. He argued that if there was one thing he would save in the event of a fire (besides other people of course) it would be our photographic archive. What

he rightly understood was that the photo collection provided a unique and irreplaceable archive of people and place. If a picture is worth a thousand words or even a hundred points of data, what value might an entire archive like this possess?

Since its invention in the 1880s, film-based photography has been used as a tool to document landscapes, including 'wilderness' and glaciers, by what the author describes as 'glacier naturalists'. These were not scientists per se and their purpose was not to collect scientific evidence but to capture and advertise the beauty of these remote places. With these individuals as a starting point, Inkpen uses *Capturing Glaciers* to take us on a journey through twentieth century glaciology, laying out how photography fell out of favour, to be subsumed by more quantitative and specialised methods before, at the start of the 21st century, the need for a 'poster child' for climate change brought it back again as a means to communicate in a visual and visceral way the impacts of a changing climate.

The book is extremely well-researched and provides some fascinating insights into the development of modern glaciology in North America. It introduces some of the ground-breaking pioneers in the field such as Austin Post and Mark Meir, considering how, initially, 'glacier naturalists' were often from a mountaineering background or supported by mountaineers, noting how their efforts led, for example, to the founding of the Alpine Club of Canada. It also considers how repeat photography of glacier change can be an imperfect communication tool when speaking to a wider audience. Wilderness can seem remote, irrelevant and, for many, inconsequential. Additionally, the relationship of individual glaciers with climate is complex such that adjacent glaciers in different morphological settings can behave quite differently. This is, at least, what Inkpen argues through the lens, almost exclusively, of the 20th century history of North American glaciology and a handful of key players in that history. Inevitably, it is selective and a narrative description of a complex thread of social, scientific, political and even military priorities. It is not exactly, however, a history I recognise.

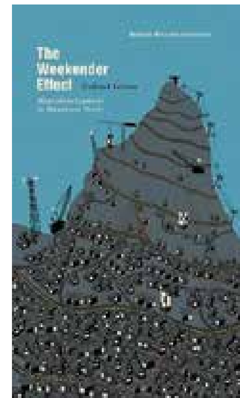
My first field glaciology expedition was some forty years ago in the Northern Areas of Pakistan (known today as Gilgit-Baltistan) and pretty much the first thing we did upon arriving was to photograph everything! A photograph may not represent a quantitative, scientific observation but, as my colleague argued at that leaving party, it provides a unique and unambiguous record. So much so that photographs from US spy satellites, launched at the height of the Cold War and recently declassified, have been digitised so that they can be used by glaciologists to measure changing glacier areas.

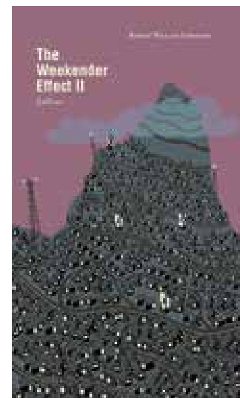
While it is true that new technologies came along, this does not mean that simpler, and importantly, extremely reliable forms of observation were no longer valuable. In harsh, remote environments such methods are often preferable. Surface mass balance is still routinely measured using a metal cylinder of known volume and a spring balance (or perhaps today an electronic set of scales). It's reliable, fool-proof and simple to use, all important

requirements for field based observations. As a consequence, framing the use of photography and specialist geophysical instruments as an either/or is, in my view, a false dichotomy. Both are valuable, useful and used.

This misconception notwithstanding, Inkpen does eloquently summarise the ambiguous and problematic nature of the use and abuse of glacier repeat photography to 'counter' the powerful voices of climate scepticism in early 2000s America. In addition, her commendable love and fascination for these ethereal rivers of ice pervades her writing and interest in the topic. The book contains many interesting anecdotes about the history of the discipline in North America, such as the role that the Office of Naval Research played after the Second World War in establishing the Juneau Icefield Research Project, an institution which continues to train many glaciologists worldwide. While *Capturing Glaciers* has a distinctly North American focus, tending occasionally to sweeping generalisations, for anyone interested in the evolution of ideas, approaches and external forces which have influenced the field of glaciology over the last century, it is well worth a read.

Jonathan Bamber





The Weekender Effect: Updated Edition
Hyperdevelopment in Mountain Towns
Robert William Sandford
Rocky Mountain Books, 2023, 115pp, CA$15

The Weekender Effect II
Fallout
Robert William Sandford
Rocky Mountain Books, 2023, 292pp, CA$20

In 2008 Robert William Sandford, an eminent Canadian professor and author, decided to get personal and wrote a short 'manifesto' on environment and culture. He turned his gaze from the water sector and global sustainability, where he advises government and UN forums, and looked inward to his home town of Canmore, Alberta which was 'under invasion from the outside', experiencing the impacts of what some have termed 'amenity migration'. This is a form of migration driven by factors such as attractive landscape, favourable climate and cultural infrastructure.

The result was *The Weekender Effect: Hyperdevelopment in Mountain Towns*, which has just been issued in an updated edition by Rocky Mountain Books. Now with a new foreword, and looking back at the past fifteen years, Sandford acknowledges he got some things wrong. Notably, the ability of

weekenders and retirees to contribute positively to the development of the town and bolster community values. But he believes his overall thesis of hyperdevelopment, with its associated ills of vastly expanded wealth disparity and increasing encroachment on nature and heritage, has been proved correct: '(t)hings are being lost that have not yet been found'.

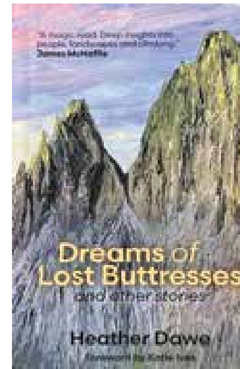
Clearly, so much has changed that Sandford was minded to write a sequel, *The Weekender Effect II: Fallout*. This volume now strains the definition of a short manifesto, although its polemic has taken on new strength, fuelled by the growing severity of the climate and biodiversity crises, and seen from the goldfish bowl optics of the Covid-19 pandemic. In essence, over time and aided by an intense period of backyard-based reflection, Sandford has cast his intellectual net wider to reflect on the pandemic; sense of place; what we can learn from nature and our mountain environments; and the very nature of hope – still not lost, in his opinion.

The new book is more organic and free-flowing and – quite frequently – takes a much wider view beyond mountain towns, invoking Gaia theory, indigenous wisdom and Peter Wohlleben's 'world wood web'. Although previous authorial influences still pop up (Wallace Stegner; Terry Tempest Williams; Wes Jackson), the book is animated by long textual reflections on a new set of guiding stars, including Camus (*The Plague*, unsurprisingly), Thomas Axworthy (former adviser to former Canadian premier Pierre Trudeau), Margaret Atwood, Amitav Ghosh and Suzanne Simard, to name but a few. But Sandford is doing far more than finding like minds to quote and riff off. Through these disparate authors, he is finding synthetic, and at time synergistic solutions for our 21st century environmental and social maladies.

A strong thread throughout the book is our warped relationship with place. In Canada, and its 'mountain West', Sandford invokes the particularity of the north American frontier mentality: 'discovering' new resources and the shifting extraction of both capital and culture. This relationship with place needs to change fundamentally, something that may be aided by our experience of the pandemic, Sandford avers: 'We can use this moment for a global reset that will ensure a future of hope […] the parks, protected places and natural buffer zones of the mountain West must play an expanded role in determining our future'.

Both books are rallying cries for the role of mountains in the future of the planet but underline that we must approach them, and live within them and their limits, in new ways. The first book, now updated, is still perhaps more coherent and on point as a critique. But *The Weekender II: Fallout* develops vital new thinking and offers more of an agenda for change. In *Fallout*, Sandford shows that we are now even closer to a pivot point and desperately close to running out of time. Optimistically he still sees that a better world is possible, what he calls 'a second, new and very different Enlightenment' and invokes us all to be the catalysts of that renaissance. Like me, he's also buoyed by youth engagement in climate advocacy and the potential of the next generation to fix things. Let's hope his optimism is justified.

Andy Tickle



Dreams of Lost Buttresses
Heather Dawe (Foreword by Katie Ives)
Little Peak Press, 2023, 93pp, £20

The 13 stories contained in this beautifully produced and illustrated book take the reader beyond the physicality of climbing into a quite different realm. Climbing literature is often focused on the competitive: racing to push grades, climbing faster, challenging others as well as yourself. Interpretation of a face or peak requires calculation and precision, reading the surface like a mathematical problem, unlocking its patterns and learning how to follow them. Thus, experiences are necessarily intense, focused onto microcosms within the structure of the rock or ice. Intuition plays its part, feeding the intensity by drawing subconsciously on past experience to solve present problems. Ideally, moves flow with the surface to give a feeling of oneness and a dynamic fluidity which allow climbers to become an integral part of their landscapes for the duration of the climb.

Dawe shifts the focus of this intensity, moving beyond rationality and seeking to explore the fantastical and the mythical, in order to better convey the need to respond more empathetically to the environment. Climbing fiction may speak of conquering or mastering a problem with the implication that nature is subservient to the desires of the individual, thus feeding the all too pervasive viewpoint which is damaging beyond repair the world in which we live. Instead, Dawe offers an absorption – both literal and metaphorical – allowing imagination and transformation to subvert the focus on grades and reputations.

The title story perfectly illustrates this construct. The protagonist's 'hunger' for climbing consumed her and constantly improving grades were all she could think of, to the extent that 'birdsong dimmed and moorlands blurred.' Her dreams were haunted by a distant peak which seemed to shapeshift and grow in size as her ambitions grew. This representation of her ambitions eventually settled itself as the sacred Mt Kailash, 'unclimbed and unattainable' and so it drove her on still harder. Then friends were killed in the Alps, children came along, grief and family commitments ate at her longings and climbing ceased. When she returned, as a result of her daughter's desire to climb, she 'found she was no longer fighting the rock, but transforming herself to meet it.' Her ambition had changed, settling into a calm which gave her a more spiritual understanding of her environment. The visionary peak returned to her dreams, acknowledged both as a reminder of her former obsessions and a pathway to her new awareness: 'But Jesus it's beautiful.'

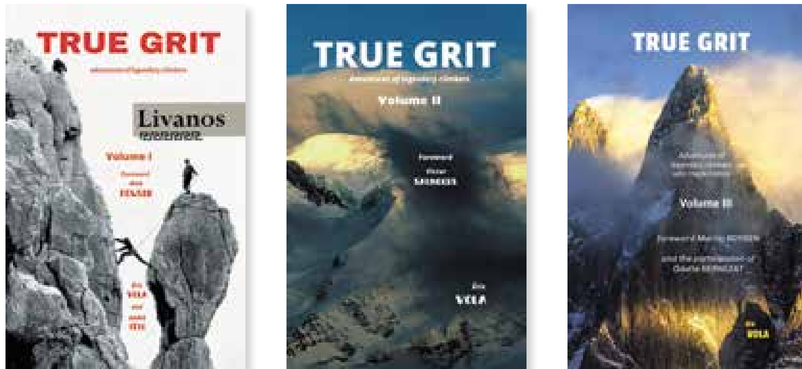
Transfiguration occurs in several of the stories in this selection; in *Selkie Boy*, Nell finds respite from her job in the stifling city and her career soaked in mathematical probabilities by climbing on the Pembrokeshire sea cliffs,

with many of its routes named after myths and legends. She moves on the rock with a deep feeling for its beauty and history which seems to conjure a selkie boy from the water. She follows him into the sea, changed forever into an integral part of the landscape she loves with such fierce intensity.

This slim volume should not be underestimated: Dawe reminds us that we are inescapably a part of the living world we seem bent on destroying and she warns of the consequences of our self-inflicted separation from it. She offers a painful glimpse into a world controlled by robots in which a lone climber has to fight for the right to use his imagination. She contrasts this with Astrid, who comes to the forest only to make her name with new lines on boulders but is welcomed into it by the collective sentience of the trees, to which she responds. When she claims her first ascent, the way she has gone about it 'also dialled her into the forest environment.'

Dreams of Lost Buttresses offers an alternative way of thinking about climbing and its place within the natural world, broadening this standpoint to remind us that the adaptability and creativity required on a route can be harnessed to revitalise approaches to curing the ills which we have inflicted on our environment. Dawe has brought a fresh voice to mountaineering literature, imbued with links to an earlier world. The ravens which croak their wisdom, the mythical figures which come alive and the ancient carvings in rock which demonstrate a long-lost closeness to nature are all signposts to a more intuitive and imaginative way of saving what little wilderness we have left. May we heed them well.

Val Johnson



True Grit, Volumes I, II & III
Eric Vola
Self-Published, 2024, 197pp/201pp/197pp, £12.00/£10.50/£10.00

These three compilations of articles, historic photographs, reproductions of watercolours, and humorous stories have been put together and largely authored by Eric Vola. The three volumes are, like him, unforgettable.

Each book is a perfectly bound paperback of around 200 pages, with a

foreword written by members of the ancient regime; Mick Fowler, Victor Saunders and Martin Boysen. I had better confess that Eric is known to me; I have climbed at Fontainebleau with him, stayed (along with Robert Pettigrew and Peter Boardman) at his apartment in Paris and met him in Wales with a star-studded group of French climbers on an official BMC International visit. And perhaps you should also know that when young he attended university in the UK. The stories of how he made contact with the British climbing establishment of that time are a humorous part of his oeuvre. He first tried the Alpine Club (then in South Audley Street) which was full with golden oldies wearing spats. He then tried the Tuesday Climbing Club who he found were mainly into walking. He was finally rescued by Christian Bonington and Nick Estcourt who took him out for some real climbing. He even managed to persuade Whillans to lead him up *Bloody Slab* on Cloggy.

Volume I of this set is made up of nine articles and from the outset one is made to realise how lucky Eric was to meet up with a group of Marseille climbers and its leading light, Georges 'Le Grec' Livanos and his wife Sonia. The nearby Calanques was their local climbing ground and they formed the Groupe des Grimpeurs Marseillais. From such a base, Livanos became one of the new wave leaders after the war, and made early attempts on the great challenges of the Western Alps such as the west face of the Drus. Being a worker who only had limited holidays his climbing was frequently stymied by inclement weather and he decided to concentrate on the Dolomites. One of his outstanding routes there was the *Cima Su Alto* on the Civetta. Livanos wrote two excellent books *Au Dela de la Vertical* (Beyond the Vetrical) and a volume about Cassin *Il Etait une Fois le Sixieme Degree* (It was a time of the sixth degree). Unfortunately they were never translated or published in the UK. Fortunately for us, some of the articles in this volume are by Livanos and some by André Téte. One by the latter is the 'Inclassifiable Eric Vola' which exposes a little of the main author's rare personality.

Volume II offers a spread of six articles, with a number focussing on alpine controversies, starting with the original, which commenced after the first ascent of Mont Blanc by Michel Paccard and Jacques Balmat in August 1789. The former was the local doctor in Chamonix, the latter a crystal hunter who is often dismissively labelled as a local peasant. Horace-Bénédict De Saussure, a well-known Geneva scientist, had offered a reward for the first persons to ascend the mountain and Paccard agreed that if they were successful then Balmat could claim this for himself. After they were successful, Balmat reported he had led the way to the summit, and in fact had needed to more or less carry Paccard up the final slopes. This account, according to those who had followed the climb through telescopes on the Brévent, was a distortion. Eventually Balmat's claims were dismissed by the doctor, but nevertheless he allowed him to claim Saussure's reward.

Other re-examined controversies include the credit due to expedition doctors Griffith Pugh and Mike Ward for the successful 1953 first ascent of Everest. Ward definitely believed that without the work and advice of Pugh,

the expedition would not have succeeded; a view that is underlined by Harriet Tuckey's book published in 2013; something that is reported as not being agreed by John Hunt in his book *The Ascent of Everest*. I knew John well for I was secretary of a committee he chaired and once his mind was made up it was hard to change it! Another article takes on one of the greatest Himalayan controversies; Bonatti and the ghosts of K2. The mountain was climbed in 1954 by Lacedelli and Compagnoni but the argument is over how this was accomplished; by a high carry of their oxygen cylinders which resulted in Bonatti and a porter, Amir Mehdi, having to make a forced bivouac which resulted in the latter suffering severe frostbite. The whole affair resulted in legal action and it was to be many years before Bonatti's view of events was agreed.

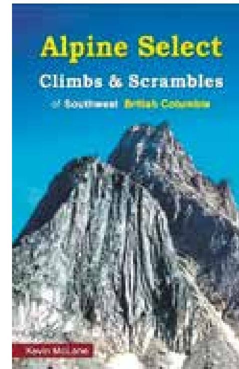
Other pieces cover reaccreditation of routes in the Écrins, the epic of the first winter ascent of the Devils' Needles (Les Aiguilles du Diable) and a literary memorial to Jean Afanassief, Afa to all who knew him. I climbed with Afa in 1977 when he was a member of a party of visiting French climbers, including Simone Badier. I had real difficulty persuading Afa to stop and belay on any of our routes. I pleaded that our piddling little cliffs at Tremadog required pitches, not single run outs!

Volume III contains eight articles, and covers a number of epics in the mountains of the Alps, including the 1956 Vincendon and Henry tragedy and the 1966 rescue on the west face of Les Drus. There is also a profile of Patrick Edlinger who was well known to me as he was a member of a small party of French climbers I took around our country in 1983 to investigate our climbing walls. I followed his subsequent climbing career, a highpoint of which was the film *Life at the Edge of the Finger Tips*. He was a true star of the sport climbing revolution and his tragic death at the age of 52 was a shocking event.

This final book of the trilogy is not all tragedy. There is a guest article from Odette Frolich about the adventures of a group of Marseille climbers and their experiences at summer camps in Chamonix, while the final chapter is the author's own account of his ersatz first winter ascent of the Pilier Boccalatte on Mont Blanc du Tacul with Polish climber Andrzej Mroz. They were to learn some time later, that theirs was the second winter ascent; the tracks they had seen had been, not as they had assumed from climbers on another route, but from the successful first party.

All in all, these three volumes are far more than just a read through of interesting historical events, but are rather a chronicle of some of the greatest ascents in the history of our sport. If I might be permitted a small criticism it would be that the end result would have benefitted from a more thorough edit. This would have avoided some unfortunate duplications, such as Raymond Lambert's letter on page 104 of Volume II appearing again a few pages later! Nevertheless, they are an engaging read and I would recommend them to any climber for their variety and depth alone.

Dennis Gray



Alpine Select
Climbs & Scrambles of Southwest British Columbia
Kevin McLane
High Col Press, 2023, 352pp, CA$29.95

The *Alpine Select* guide covers the summer alpine climbing objectives in the northern (Canadian) Cascades and the southern end of the Coast Range – generally accessible from Vancouver. This area is typically not on the radar of British climbers – they might travel to Squamish or the Bugaboos, but not to this particular region. However, south-west British Columbia has some impressive mountains and classic routes, the most famous of which is the Northeast Buttress of Mount Slesse, one of the 50 classic climbs of North America.

The guide is split into 8 areas, with a colour-coded chapter for each. Each chapter starts with an overview of the area, followed by detailed descriptions of approaches, before the mountains and climbs themselves are described.

In-depth descriptions of approaches tend to be key to climbing mountains in Canada. With a few exceptions, the approaches to most peaks tend to be more complex than in the European Alps, without marked trails or huts. This also means that the majority of the climbs are multi-day affairs, upping the adventure factors with long, complex approaches and descents. Handily, all of the routes covered here have clear photo topos for the routes, approaches, and descents, along with detailed descriptions.

It's important to be aware that the routes in this guide are nowhere near as popular as those you may be used to in the Alps. As a consequence, there may be some margin for error in the descriptions, especially given the increase in glacier recession and lower snowfalls of recent years. As far as I can tell, the book lists only one potentially 'busy' route and that is the aforementioned Northeast Buttress of Slesse. If, like me, you favour solitude in the mountains, this can only be seen as a positive.

The routes are graded using the International (French) Alpine Grading System, from F to ED, while the rock-climbing sections are graded using the Yosemite decimal system. This consistent delineation makes the difficulty of the climbs easy to parse and ensures that international visitors are unlikely to get caught out by a route that is beyond their abilities.

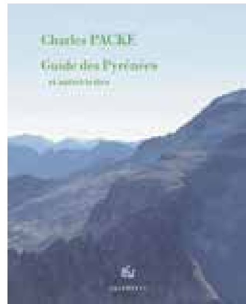
At the end of each chapter the long alpine traverses in the area, such as the Tantalus traverse or the Viennese-Clarke are described. This makes a nice addition to the descriptions of the individual routes and offers the reader greater guidance for more complex undertakings. At the start of the book there is a list of 50 recommended climbs across the grade spectrum and including all of the covered areas. This is an excellent feature which makes for a good starting point when researching which routes to climb.

The routes themselves can be split into two main themes; alpine rock climbs and classic alpine routes. The rock in the area is predominantly granite

and the rock climbs go from long, 'sub-alpine' rock climbs such as *Yak Check* (5.10a) on Yak Peak, to major alpine rock climbs with glaciated approaches like The North ridge of Mount Clark (TD) or Dione West face (TD). There is also a good selection of classic-style alpine routes, including the East ridge of Alpha Peak (AD) and the East ridge of Mount Matier (AD), which feature impressive ridgelines and glaciation. Needless to say, there are enough climbs in the guide to sustain several trips to the region.

This guidebook will appeal in particular to climbers who want to get off the beaten track and find solitude in some very adventurous peaks that are still, on a global scale, relatively accessible. I have been told by a Squamish local that the philosophy of the *Alpine Select* guide (this is the second edition) is that any given route should be achievable from Vancouver in a long weekend, and the guide certainly seems to deliver on this objective. It also, thanks to its excellent accompanying pictures, provides plenty of inspiration to make the drive out from Vancouver and experience the landscape in the flesh. For those planning to visit western Canada for the purpose of alpine climbing, this book is an essential purchase.

Timothy Elson



Also Received

The Club is very grateful to Vincent Ozanam of French publisher *Solanhets* for providing the Alpine Club Library with a copy of the first ever French translation of the works of Charles Packe (1826-1896). Packe was an honorary secretary of the Alpine Club who explored and climbed extensively in the Pyrénées. In 1862, he published *A Guide to the Pyrénées* with the subtitle 'Especially Intended for the Use of Mountaineers'.

This guide forms the bulk of the new French language translation along with some of Packe's other works and a number of articles that originally appeared in French. ***Guide des Pyrénées et autres textes*** can be borrowed from the Library and is also available for purchase direct from the *Solanhets* website: ***solanhets.eu***

We would also like to express our gratitude to famed mountain chronicler Jerzy Wala who has sent us a copy of his latest offering, ***Ghujerab Mountains 2023***, which documents this northern Karakoram range. Mr Wala's work will be familiar to many exploratory mountaineers who will have benefited from his detailed profiles of various ranges and associated maps. As the front cover of this most recent tome notes, the book is a non-commercial venture and, while it is not available for sale, it can be viewed by arrangement with the Club Library.

Following a special launch event at Charlotte Road in July 2024, we were pleased to receive a copy of the newly republished ***Climbing Days***, the mountaineering memoir of Dorothy Pilley – now back in print thanks to the efforts of Dorothy's great grand-nephew, Dan Richards and Canongate Books.

Other titles received include the latest (seventh) edition of Cicerone's ***Winter Climbs in the Cairngorms*** (2023) by Blair Fyffe and John Lyall and ***Eastern Sardinia Crags*** (2024) from Italian publisher Versante Sud and author Richard Felderer.