

Meditations on the Peaks: Mountain Climbing as a Metaphor for the Spiritual Quest. Julius Evola, translated by Guido Stucco. Inner Traditions: Rochester, Vermont, 1998. 115 pages. \$12.95.

At first glance, I thought *Meditations on the Peaks: Mountain Climbing as a Metaphor for the Spiritual Quest* was another of those climbing-as-self-discovery books that are proving so popular these days. Therefore, it was against all expectations that I found myself fascinated with this odd little book. Here are 20 short essays loosely arranged into three sections: "Experiences," "Doctrines," and "Appendices," of which there are five. The works were written between 1927 and 1942 and published for the first time as a collection in Italian in 1974, the year of Evola's death.

The Doctrine essays, which discuss how mountains have been used metaphorically in ancient religious literature, both Eastern and Western, were most fascinating to me. Evola tracks the mountain as metaphor from Valhalla to Olympus, from 11th century Tibetan ascetics to Tyrolean superstitions.

The essays collected in Experiences (and most of the Appendices) are extremely interesting as well. These are not run-of-the-mill stories and banal observations by professional climbing writers on heavily sponsored trips. These essays are comprised of Evola's observations garnered during his experiences in the 1920s and '30s in the Alps and filtered through his extensive background in comparative religions. In almost all the essays, the impact of mysticism is plain: "There are always moments . . . in which physical and meta-physical elements converge and the outer adheres to the inner." Most of the time this mysticism is of a clearly Eastern flavor, showing influences from Vedanta and Yoga: "When the mind, which is deluded by the apparition of the external world, has finally understood the teaching concerning phenomena, it experiences . . . no difference between phenomena and emptiness."

Evola was not just content with mystical observation. He believed that the Eastern techniques of meditation could improve the mental discipline of the alpinist. The ability to dictate one's thoughts and not give into fear, the capacity for focus and concentration, the control of breath are all as important to meditation as they are to climbing.

This predilection for Eastern thought does not prevent Evola from writing insightfully about the Christian folk religion of the Tyrol, nor does it prevent him from lamenting its demise. His observations on the climbing culture of his day are particularly eye-opening. He says the 'new' generation of climbers

have turned athletic competition into a religion and appear to be unable to conceive anything beyond the excitement of training sessions, competitions and physical achievements; they have truly turned accomplishment in sports into an end in itself and even into an obsession rather than as a means to a higher end.

Sound familiar?

He also bemoans the advent of "extreme sports" and the "mania for that which is difficult and unusual for the sake of setting new records." These observations were made in about 1930, the generation of today's climbers' grandparents and great-grandparents.

Another strange kind of reverse *déjà vu* is Evola's dislike of crowds: "And thus in the mountains . . . there is no longer any room. It will be great luck if the best climbers are able to . . . find again in the mountains a really wholesome experience . . ." He particularly disliked aerial tramways, calling them a "contamination."

However, if all this makes Evola sound like some kind of sanctimonious/vegetarian/holier-than-thou type, let me correct that impression. Although he carried a copy of the Bhagavad Gita on his climbs, he also carried a bottle of whiskey. I admire his life in both worlds: sacred and profane, transcendent and imminent. Even when he admits to the pleasures and diversions of this world, it is through a religious perspective. The best example of this is his tale of how he and his buddies get drunk one night in an alpine hut. In the middle of the night they walk out onto a nearby frozen lake in the dark. He theorizes that the lake must have been going through some temperature metamorphosis, because it starts to crack and break up violently when they are out in the middle of it: "To feel all of a sudden under one's feet a roar that grows into a loud booming noise, which is then echoed by the mountain, is almost like hearing the voice of the earth itself." Very few could hear such an other-worldly noise and yet hear the voice of worldliness as well. This is what makes Evola unique.

DAVE HALE

Distant Mountains. John Cleare. Discovery Channel Books: New York, 1998. 160 color photos. 173 pages. \$35.00.

“What beautiful names the mountains and glaciers have in this region . . .” said W.M. Conway of the Jungfrau region of Europe’s Alps. These same words work to describe the contents of *Distant Mountains* by John Cleare. Not only has Cleare captured the descriptive prose of such mountain legends as Conway, Tilman, Murray, and others in his new book, he has once again captured for his readers a number of amazing mountain images as well.

John Cleare is one of the most respected mountain photographers in the history of mountain travel. In this book, as with his 15 previous titles, he has combined his art and abilities as a mountaineer, but here he has included too the inspiring words of some of his legendary predecessors and contemporaries to provide the reader with an amazing vicarious experience in some of the world’s wildest and most beautiful mountain ranges. From the Highlands of Scotland to the Andes, from the Himalaya to the Rockies, *Distant Mountains* contains some 160 beautiful color photographs that serve to complement masterful essays. Nicholas Crane writes on the Pyrenees, W.M. Conway on the Alps, David Harris on the Canadian Rockies, Steve Roper on the mountains of the American Southwest, Mike Banks on the Andes, Kurt Diemberger on Pakistan Karakoram, Jim Perrin on the Garhwal Himalaya of India, Kev Reynolds on the Himalaya of Nepal, H.W. Tilman on the mountains of East Africa, and Cleare himself on Patagonia.

Distant Mountains is more than a large-format anthology. It also provides practical information for mountain travelers and armchair adventures alike by including in each chapter maps and tables, notes on the local geology, flora, and fauna, warnings regarding hazards specific to each mountain range, and suggestions on equipment. For instance, the chapter, “The Abode of the Gods” (Kev Reynolds), is followed by the very timely “The Nepal Himalaya ‘Factfile,’” which provides a map and several paragraphs of information and advice under the subheadings Background, Access, and Climbing and Trekking. The information found here is clear and straight-forward. To wit, in Climbing and Trekking: “For climbers, the several hundred Permitted Peaks (none of which are virgin) offer plenty of new routes. Siege tactics, oxygen and big expeditions are, these days, considered inappropriate, and ideally climbs should be attempted alpine style. . . . Climbers and Trekkers alike should treat altitude . . . very seriously. AMS (Acute Mountain Sickness) regularly kills and there is no substitute for proper acclimatization.” Important information and advice for anyone interested in visiting high,