By one of those coincidences that must play havoc with publishers’ bottom line, these two books on an identical subject appeared last year. Since none of their contents is new—no great archives exhumed from the Zermatt library, alas—it’s their perspective that we judge, how well they have picked over the ground, synthesizing fragments into seamless narrative.

Fergus Fleming’s *Killing Dragons* is as near to flawless as this kind of thing can be. His writing is a constant pleasure: witty and always on top of his material. Here is Fleming’s beginning of Chapter Two. “A feature of eighteenth century Geneva was its extraordinary number of suicides.” And of Tyndall’s declining years he says: “People spoke of him with awe, the Matterhorn’s lower peak was named Pic Tyndall in his honor and the Emperor of Brazil asked for two signed photographs, but never again did he climb a mountain.” Fleming is a master finder and presenter of detail. Good on character, he tells much of his story through the contrasting tales of Saussure/Burrit, Forbes/Agassiz, Tyndall/Whymper, and others.

His book deserves a place alongside Claire Engel’s *History of Mountaineering in the Alps* and Ronald Clark’s *Early Alpine Guides and Victorian Mountaineers*. Though he has used these sources liberally, Fleming’s weave is different from theirs and deftly blends mountaineering sagas with the rise of the resorts, the tuberculosis sanatoria and the railroads, the spread of nationalism, etc. (Did you know that Mussolini created a medal to be given to climbers who made a Grade 6 first ascent?)

On one point only would I criticize Fleming’s research: he fails to tell us how and why dragons became demonized (in China they were emblems of the sacred) and why they made their appearance in the Alps. He goes no further than to attribute a belief in dragons to superstition. A good source on this topic is Simon Schama’s best-selling *Landscape and Memory*. According to Schama, remote mountains in the Middle Ages were the habitat of anchorites and mystics, who in their spare time slew symbolic evil in the guise of dragons. The dragons were interlopers, an exception to the sacred character of mountains.

Jim Ring’s book is strange, in that it could with little alteration have been published 60 years ago, so deeply is it embedded in a post-Imperial time warp. I never thought that I’d find myself in a state of desire for a post-modernist/revisionist text, but Ring put me there. As I read, I heard echoes of Edward Elgar’s “Pomp and Circumstance,” and drifted back to my school days when the map of the world was three-quarters British pink, while before me Ring’s hagiographies of splendid chaps followed one after the other. Whereas Fleming, in the modern vein, presents the chief characters’ blemishes (often following them into old age, where their flaws are magnified), nary a stain marks Ring’s treatment of the heroes of old. In keeping with the Imperial gaze, French, Swiss, and Italian local climbers, hoteliers, and guides are simply background, like the cattle grazing in the Alps. There is one singular exception, when Ring quotes the writer Theophile Gautier on the English alpinist, the Reverend J.J. Elliott (Fleming uses the same quote):

“A tall young man, strong and thin, dressed in brown corduroy, with gaiters up to the knees, a soft felt hat pulled down over his eyes, looking a perfect gentleman in spite of