Through the lens of the repeated German attempts on Nanga Parbat between 1932 and 1953, as well as some of the early Everest expeditions, Jonathan Neale scrutinizes what can only be called the character of both Sherpas and sahibs. He provides sensitive portraits of individual Sherpas, as well as an intimate look at Sherpas’ attitudes toward and experience of their work in Himalayan mountaineering. Neale clearly has enormous respect and affection for Sherpas, and the point of the book is to give them as much credit as possible for all they have done in this historic enterprise. At the same time the book is equally revealing of the Western mountaineers; Neale provides some very insightful takes on sahibs at their best and worst.

Several things contribute to the strength of *Tigers of the Snow*. First and foremost, Neale spent long periods of time in both Darjeeling (in Himalayan India) and Khumbu (the Sherpas’ home region in Nepal). He made an effort to learn the Sherpa language (a dialect of Tibetan) and to get a feel for Sherpa society and culture. While the book does not add anything new to our understanding of that society and culture (nor was it meant to do so), this background work clearly helped Neale with his main objective, which was interviewing older climbing Sherpas.

The most important of these interviews were with Ang Tsering Sherpa, one of the survivors of the 1934 Nanga Parbat expedition, who was about 95 or 96 years old at the time of the interviews in 2000. Neale also interviewed about 20 other retired climbing Sherpas and sirdars, as well as in some cases their wives or widows. He was able to get people to open up to an unusual degree about their feelings with respect to climbing—the danger, the money, the sahibs. He also learned certain hitherto unknown details of Sherpa experience on the early expeditions, and especially on the 1934 Nanga Parbat expedition which is his main focus.

The other major strength of the book derives from Neale’s critical perspectives on the sahibs. In the first place he has, refreshingly, no qualms whatsoever about assigning blame for accidents to specific sahibs and their bad decisions. For example, “Mallory’s ambition had led to errors of judgment that killed Lhakpa, Nurbu, Pasang, Pema, Sanga, Dorje, Pemba, Shamsherpun, Man Bahadur, Sandy Irvine, and Mallory himself” (p. 57). Or: “Ten people died on Nanga Parbat in 1934 because Willy Merkl led too many men up too quickly” (p. 122). Most strikingly, Neale gives a no-holds-barred account of two of the strongest sahibs on the 1934 expedition, Erwin Schneider and Peter Aschenbrenner, abandoning several colleagues and Sherpas high on the mountain and then, because the three struggling Sherpas they were with were
slowing them down, putting on their skis and skiing away from them to safety. Two of those Sherpas subsequently died on the way down.

In addition, Neale offers some interesting interpretations for why sahibs made these kinds of bad and fatal decisions. For example, he writes of the pressures Willy Merkl felt to deliver a victory to the Nazi government in Germany that was funding the expedition. He brings up as well Merkl's class background: “Most German climbers in the Himalayas, like most British and American ones, were business or professional men from comfortable homes. Merkl was not of this class”—he was raised by a single mother, went to a state technical high school rather than the more prestigious gymnasium, served in the army as a private—and, Neale suggests, felt the pressure to prove his worth (p. 93-94).

This theme of the significance of social class in understanding the sahibs’ actions is illuminating throughout the book. In discussing the early Everest expeditions, Neale sees the arrogance of the sahibs largely in terms of their upper class backgrounds. Speculating about why the inexperienced Sandy Irvine was chosen to go with Mallory to the summit, Neale writes, “It was a sign of the amateurism of the British climbing world, and their class confidence, that a chap could make it to the highest camp on Everest on the word of other Oxford men who found him a useful fellow” (p. 56). In a later chapter Neale discusses the impact on the Sherpas of the French and Swiss expeditions in the early ’50s. The Swiss in particular were extremely egalitarian, which made an enormously positive impression on the Sherpas, who loathed the requirements of servility vis-à-vis sahibs but of course could do nothing about them. Neale points out that virtually all of the Swiss on the Everest expeditions, and most of the French on the Annapurna expedition, were Alpine guides of peasant origins not that far in the past, and thus not all that different from the Sherpas themselves. Some Sherpas had in fact recognized this: “I asked Khansa of Namche who was the best foreigner he ever climbed with. Lionel Terray, he said ... I said that Terray was a guide, and that the grandfathers of the guides had been farmers like the Sherpas when the climbers first came. Khansa said all the Sherpas knew that, and they loved that the French had learned from their ancestors how to carry weight on the head strap” (p. 245).

Neale also relates Edmund Hillary’s greatness as both a climber and a human being to his working class background: “A man of Hillary’s class would not have been on a prewar expedition...Hillary worked for his father in the family beekeeping business, making a living with his muscles. He was tall, big, strong, a superb climber, deeply egalitarian, and an utterly decent man” (p. 270). Neale even has a class analysis of why the British succeeded on Everest in 1953: “After 1945, working people all over Western Europe had far more dignity and respect. Without that, Hunt would not have been able to take Hillary. Without Indian independence, and without the Swiss, he would not have been able to imagine making Tenzing a member” (272).

The weaknesses of the book revolve around its main claim, as represented in the subtitle: “How one fateful climb made the Sherpas mountaineering legend.” Neale never makes a persuasive case that the 1934 Nanga Parbat expedition was in fact decisive in making the Sherpas “mountaineering legends.” On the contrary, in the year before that expedition, in 1933, the British on Everest were struck with the strides the Sherpas had made since the 1920’s expeditions, how much tougher and more fearless and more professionalized they had become. Something had already been happening in that decade between the early ’20s and the early ’30s to bring about these changes in Sherpa attitudes toward their work. My own inclination would be to look for the sources of those changes within the Sherpa community itself, perhaps in the ways in which older climbing Sherpas were passing on accounts of the ’20s expeditions to their sons
and other young men. But we do not really have this information.

The second major problem with the book relates to the first. Because Neale wants the 1934 Nanga Parbat expedition to carry so much weight in his account, and because all the Sherpas except Ang Tsering who had been on the expedition had either died during the climb or since, Neale simply does not have enough information to make a case for what happened on the mountain at many key points in the story. Thus he resorts to fictionalizing the thoughts and words of deceased Sherpas and sahibs who can no longer speak for themselves, most notably the thoughts and words of Willy Merkl and Gaylay during their dying hours.

Initially I found myself swept along by the fictional sections, in part because—probably like Neale himself—I wanted an unbroken and compelling narrative of what happened. But this is really not satisfactory, and I had a sort of queasy feeling afterward about the liberties Neale took with the writing in these sections.

But the book has many virtues, as I tried to indicate earlier. Thus despite these reservations I would certainly recommend this work to anyone interested in getting a much more intimate perspective on Himalayan mountaineering history, itself part of a larger and longer unfolding history of the encounter of “East” and “West.”

SHERRY B. ORTNER


Ask Brad Washburn to sign a copy of Among the Alps With Bradford, the first mountaineering book he ever wrote, and you’ll get more than an autograph. Washburn likes to doodle in the current year, sometimes underlined, sometimes accented with an exclamation point. I suspect he takes great pleasure in seeing today’s date alongside the book’s original copyright. Washburn wrote Among the Alps on the heels of an extraordinarily successful summer when he ticked a number of classic and coveted alpine summits including Mont Blanc, the Matterhorn, and the Géron. In Washburn’s case, however, it was all the more remarkable because he was only sixteen years old. The book was published the following year, in 1927.

Nearly 80 years later, Washburn has many more extraordinary climbs—most notably in Alaska—and a host of other books to his credit. Along the way, he and his wife Barbara have almost single-handedly built one of the world’s great science museums, he’s become a legend of mountain mapping and photography, and—perhaps most impressive of all—Brad and Barbara recently celebrated their sixty-third wedding anniversary. Despite Washburn’s mountain of published work, On High: The Adventures of Legendary Mountaineer, Photographer, and Scientist Brad Washburn is the first title that attempts to put everything into context by telling the complete story of his life. As the lengthy title implies, this is an autobiography (though it reads like a biography) with many facets.