When two professional historians venture into our domain, one might hope for something a little different from the stuff written by climbers. But this is a conventional narrative and an old-fashioned history of great men and their greatest hits, heavy on nostalgia for the glory days of Himalayan climbing. In the introduction the authors unveil their chief theme: the eclipse of the “genuinely admirable qualities [of these mountaineers], including a strong sense of fellowship and responsibility to others in the pursuit of common goals in the face of danger,” which has, alas, been supplanted by “hypertrophied commercial individualism.”

The first half of the book reflects the authors’ enthrallment with the founding patriarchs. Here the research is first rate, the narrative pacing good, the character studies nuanced. True, for many readers the pioneering and eventual conquest of K2, Nanga Parbat, Everest, Kanch, Nanda Devi, etc. are more than thrice-told tales. Ditto the legend of Shipton and Tilman. But Isserman and Weaver often update the old yarns with a fresh eye and data: for example, the recent Lachenal material on the French ascent of Annapurna in 1950 and Mallory’s relationship with Bloomsbury and his homosexuality.

Their disenchantment begins with the advent of the let-it-all-hang-out confessional expeditionary narrative—specimen expletives and candor from Rowell, Ridgeway, and Roskelley are offered—which they contrast with the old *l’amitié de la corde* and the gentlemanly code of bottling up of expeditionary rage, envy, and loathing—except as it leaked out in the rooms of the London- and New York–based alpine clubs, of course. More than once they have Charles Houston declare, “We entered the mountain as strangers, but we left as brothers.” The alleged loss of brotherhood continues in slow-motion through the 1980s and ’90s, and the book concludes with the commercialization of the 8,000-meter giants and the 1996 Everest fiasco documented by Jon Krakauer.

Valid or not (there are historiographies of a lot of things “fallen” in the 20th century), this thesis does not give good value in the book’s closing chapters. The authors consume all of 350 pages to advance their prelapsarian story to 1960. Then, with only 100 to go, their pace strangely slackens, and the digressions range far from the business of climbing. The account of the Americans on Everest in 1963 dwells heavily on the climbers’ prestige-mongering with President Kennedy. The action of the 1978 Annapurna Women’s Expedition is freighted with a long reprise of the attacks back home on its feminism, faux or authentic. There is a divagation on the invention of the trekking industry, another on the CIA-sponsored nuclear-powered
listening station on Nanda Devi. Then it dawned on me. These guys are running out the clock. At the historical moment when there is a spawn of expeditions coming from all corners of the earth, at the inflection point where there is a major leap forward in technical standards, just where there is a crying need for a comprehensive history of the Himalaya, they unaccountably give up the chase. Who knows, maybe the newer people and their projects weren’t sufficiently interesting to them. On their telling, one could never imagine that since the mid-70s the Himalayan expeditions pages of this journal have tripled, nor that high-altitude technical rock or mixed climbing has been the scene of fantastic endeavors for the last 30 years. (Not a mention of firsts on Latok, Uli Biaho, Shivling, ....) Another failure in the historians’ responsibility is their disregard of non-Anglophone achievements. The Japanese first all-women’s ascent of Everest in 1975 is kissed off with a paragraph, compared to five pages for the American women on Annapurna three years later. A paragraph is all they can spare for the path-breaking Polish first winter ascent of Everest in 1973, but they have four for the ascent of Changabang by Brits in 1974. French, Italian, and German climbers of the edenic period (K2, Nanga Parbat, Annapurna) are well covered, but after 1960 they disappear. As to the Himalayan triumphs of Slavs, Czechs, Russians, etc., these vanish into thin air.

JOHN THACKRAY


The 2006 season thrust Everest back into the public spotlight, in a way that was eerily reminiscent of a decade earlier. During spring 1996, so ably chronicled by Jon Krakauer, 12 climbers died; in 2006, 11 died, with the miraculous survival of Lincoln Hall preventing the equaling of a grisly record. In 2006 the drama took place on Everest’s north side and swirled around the ethics of mountaineering. Journalists labeled Everest a “circus,” populated by rich, spoiled pseudo-mountaineers obsessed with glory and unconcerned with its costs, financial or moral. Sir Edmund Hillary famously weighed in to castigate the state of climbing on the mountain.

Nick Heil, a freelance journalist, first covered the 2006 season in a piece for Men’s Journal. He uses his article as a springboard to writing Dark Summit: the True Story of Everest’s Most Controversial Season. Michael Kodas, also a journalist, explores the 2006 season in his book High Crimes: the Fate of Everest in an Age of Greed; yet for Kodas, 2006 was the postscript to an established pattern of poor behavior of climbers on the world’s highest peaks.

While Into Thin Air remains the benchmark for literature on Everest, Heil’s Dark Summit is an offering worthy of mention in the same sentence. Heil meticulously re-creates the events of 2006, piecing together his story from an extensive body of interviews with the climbers