Venables is honest when he admits inclusion of “an unrealistically high proportion of first ascents by British climbers.” This is certainly true, the best example being the 400-word description of the first ascent of Napes Needle, a sexy little spire in England, all of 100 feet high, climbed way back when. Yet the Cassin Ridge on Denali is not mentioned, nor is the 1965 ascent of the Hummingbird Ridge on Mt. Logan, never fully repeated and feared to this day. Talk about groundbreaking climbs! You can’t have it all. This is a problem shared by writers who purport to cover the globe but who are essentially provincial.

Venables’ chapter titles give a good indication of his subject material. Here are a few: “Pilgrims, Kings, & Prophets” deals with the first “mountaineer,” Moses on Mount Sinai, then leaps forward to French kings and the first English tourist/climbers. “Himalayan Renaissance” ably relates the beginnings of “modern” mountaineering: climbs on walls, not ridges; speedy ascents; and high adventures without using bottled oxygen. Other chapter titles need little explanation: “Mont Blanc, 1786” and “The Golden Age of Alpine Climbing.”

In this handsome book there’s much good writing and a plethora of outstanding photos, many, to my knowledge, published for the first time and therefore appealing. The splendid reproduction of many of the large pics is a testimonial to modern technology.

Venables is usually a professional wordsmith, but I have rarely seen a book so full of mistakes, many of which can be traced to the copy-editor and/or designer. Still, Venables should have proofread the book near completion. We have a legion of misspelled names—“Vittoria” Sella, “Emile” Comici, Fred “Beckley,” “Rattim” Cassin, Toni “Kurtz,” “John” Krakauer, Nick “Clench,” and dozens of others. We have Mount “Huntingdon” and “Venezuela.” We have Washburn’s Museum of Science located in Washington. We find that the North Cascades have migrated south into Oregon. We gaze upon a magnificent photo of an indolent George Mallory, but the caption refers only to a Welsh cliff. I wish Venables and his publisher had heeded A. E. Housman’s advice of 1930: “Accuracy is a duty and not a virtue.”

STEVE ROPER


Never heard of the Littledales? Neither had anyone else. They were apparently indifferent to whether anyone heard of them or not; they left no public writings and very little else. Elizabeth and Nick Clinch practically extrapolated the whole story from the Littledale’s fox terrier’s silver collar, which resides in the Royal Geographical Society archives. If you wonder what the collar is doing there, you’re beginning to think like the Clinches.

The Littledales, a married couple—St. George and Teresa—made three major journeys through Central Asia between 1890 and 1895. The first crossed the Pamirs over a period of about five months in 1890; the second crossed central Asia from Samarkand to Peking over about 11 months; the third, a journey across Tibet, lasted a year. The latter two would tally some 4,000 miles each—not that the Littledales were tracking their own mileage (and neither do the Clinches). It’s the character of the
journeys one is drawn to: traveling in small, sparsely supported parties, traveling as a married couple, and, probably the most enthralling: doing it so far from the public eye.

St. George was a world-class hunter, true, and he supplied numerous “trophies” to museums worldwide, and yet one never gets the sense that the journeys were made for this purpose. These are true explorers, adventurers of the ilk of Younghusband and Hedin (whom they knew, of course) but for whom the idea of fame meant absolutely nothing. No wonder the Clinches admire them so. In their later years hunting for its own sake had given way to collecting zoological specimens and later still to map-making and “intelligence.” Many of the Littledales’ journeys were through sensitive or “forbidden” lands and took place during the waning years of the Great Game, the rivalry between England and Russia for control and influence in Central Asia.

As their lives wound down they developed a ritual: the winding of their grandfather clock, which ran for 13-months on a single winding. They invited guest winders, who signed a special book. The list of winders features statesmen (including, gasp, Benito Mussolini!), but also Kipling, four Prime Ministers, and King George V; also Norwegian explorer Fridtjof Nansen, who wrote in the winder book: “Rooted deep in the nature of every one of us is the spirit of adventure, the call of the wild—vibrating under all our actions, making life deeper, higher and nobler.”

The introduction is a truly fascinating account of the authors’ research, which in essence starts with a conversation Nick had with, appropriately enough, Eric Shipton, who recommended to him the “unknown” Tibetan peak, Ulugh Muztagh, at 25,340 feet. It had been Littledale who had determined the height. The lengths the authors went to are a great story in itself. Let’s just say that if they had relied on Google, the book would have been shorter than this review. This was very determined, very thorough, and very patient work, and one can’t help think that if the Clinches had not done it, the Littledales would have been lost to history forever.

We live in an age wherein the details of heretofore unimaginable personal tediousness are publicly broadcast to the Twitterati. In the Littledales we have the opposite scenario: truly epic undertakings (I think the Littledales would abjure the word “heroic”), expeditions that might have filled volumes—even in their own day—but were instead done for private satisfactions. For this reason alone I’m grateful that this lacunae in the public record has been so carefully recovered. In addition, as Chris Bonington says in his foreword: the book is “particularly appropriate today when the ruthless pace of modernisation is penetrating the most distant valley of this vast, once untamed, area.” The Littledales, I think, would be flattered by the Clinches’ portrait, but may well have wondered what all the fuss was about. The closing sentence of the book is “The Littledales did it right.” And, at the risk of stating the obvious: so have the Clinches.

DAVID STEVENSON