
Ignore the vulgar subtitle and open the book. It’s filled with hundreds of glossy 12x10 pages and abundant photographs. There is also a good deal of text, but no “tales,” except of the most abbreviated kind. Instead one finds a sweeping if anecdotal history of not only mountaineering but mountains themselves, plus geological changes and evolving climbing gear, from prehistoric times until now. As with most DK Publishing books, the emphasis is on pictures, not words.

Indeed, it is hard to learn who wrote those words, which have all the personality of an encyclopedia. No author credits appear on the dust jacket or title page; you must hunt for the attribution to Ed Douglas and associates. These writers give us brief but knowledgeable accounts of peaks and those who climbed them, or tried to. The biographies, while generally adulatory as well as accurate, can be properly critical: Oscar Eckenstein was “direct, argumentative, and quick-tempered”; Don Whillans drank too much and got fat; Paul Bauer was an especially distasteful Nazi.

Mountain descriptions (a page or two each) are well chosen, but readers will regret some omissions—in my case, Mt. Kailash, the beautiful striated sacred summit of western Tibet. The photographs, some familiar, some not, are often beautiful, although a few of the older ones aren’t sharp. The pages are attractively laid out, with sidebars and boxes, and the legendary DK production is excellent, including sewn signatures, rare these days.

The book is aimed at beginners with big coffee tables. But more sophisticated readers can profit as well. How many of us know about the glaciologist Franz Josef Hugi, who made the first ascent of the Finsteraarhorn in 1828? Or the climbing monk Placidus À Spescha? Or John...
Ball, the Victorian guidebook pioneer? Or the mountain interests of people famous for other achievements, including John Ruskin and J.M.W. Turner?

Mountaineering provides no full meals, but it is a big, tasty plate of hors d'oeuvres. Above all, it reminds (or informs) us that climbing has a rich, long history. Every climbing gym should have a copy.

Steven Jervis


In the last three decades, private ski planes and chartered sailboats have rapidly opened Antarctica's long-forbidden mountains to growing numbers of climbers. Every season now, hundreds of mountaineers fan ever farther, finding spectacular summits, some not even named.

With the exception of a few well-documented expeditions to Mt. Vinson, to other peaks in the Ellsworth Mountains, to the otherworldly big walls of Queen Maud Land, and to surf-pounded towers along the Antarctic Peninsula, most ascents have previously received little attention. Furthermore there has never been a single go-to source where mountaineers can document and/or research what's where and who (if anyone) might have climbed nearby.

This vacuum of information has suddenly been filled with the publication of Mountaineering in Antarctica: Climbing in the Frozen South, a long-term labor of love by Australian explorer Damien Gildea. Although at first glance this looks like another gorgeous volume for the coffee table, it encyclopedically details virtually every expedition that has made a known first ascent below the furious fifties. In addition to the obvious locations, Gildea has included the emerging alpine paradise of South Georgia, the weather-beaten South Orkneys, and such obscure and isolated specks as the Kerguelen Islands, Peter I Island, and the Bellany Archipelago.

Judging from its span of history—and its sometimes obscure and far-flung sources—Gildea must have spent years sifting through dusty files and fading memories, getting down much that could have been forgotten. His photographic research is similarly impressive. For some places just finding anything must have been difficult, but he almost always uncovered something dramatic. (Because a few of the pictures are my own, I have to acknowledge the possibility of bias, but except for the cover photo, mine are not a significant contribution and would scarcely shape a reviewer's opinion.)

One caveat is that Mountaineering in Antarctica might disappoint a reader hoping for an epic polar story like Endurance or Mawson's Will. Gildea wrote this book as a resource, and in places it reads like a textbook. He presents so much information about so many people and places that even part of a chapter can suffice for a sitting. Nevertheless, he has honed an engaging style that keeps his narrative from dragging—expanding his prose when events deserve more attention or efficiently summarizing events of lesser import or about which little is known. Dense as it is with information, it is anything but boring.

The book's cast of characters is remarkable, stretching back to 19th-century explorers and sealers and marching through a who's who of science, aviation, and mountaineering right up to the present, when huge overhanging walls are being climbed, sometimes solo. It