

Book Reviews

EDITED BY JOHN THACKRAY

Everest: Kangshung Face. Stephen Venables. Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1989. 236 pages. Black-and-white and color photographs, maps. £14.95.

Stephen Venables, raised in a somewhat cloistered Oxford milieu (receiving a Masters degree in English literature) has been moving quietly forward in the ranks of current world-class British mountaineers. With the climb described in this book, he has leaped to their very forefront. He has also proved himself a writer of equal standing. His first book, *Painted Mountains*, attracted much attention when it won the coveted Boardman-Tasker Memorial Award for mountaineering literature in 1986. It revealed a clear, literate writing style of unaffected frankness, and the hot spark of mountaineering ambition.

This second book, with Everest as its subject, will attract a much wider audience. It is the saga of four men, Americans Robert Anderson and Ed Webster, Canadian Paul Teare and Venables, attempting the impossible—climbing Mount Everest without oxygen or Sherpas up a route that was new to 8000 meters, comprising a great variety of technical difficulties (one of which is an honest-to-God Tyrolean Traverse at 6500 meters!). The climb begins at the base of the East (Kangshung) Face of Everest at 5450 meters, weaving directly up to the South Col. From there they plan to follow the southeast (Hillary) route to the summit.

Upon reaching Base Camp, most expeditions to Everest hunker down to sort tons of gear, acclimatize and gird their loins. Not Venables et al. They go into action immediately, site Advance Base the next day and begin the push fixing ropes up their 3500-meter-high route. Here is a sample of Venables' diary entry on this push:

"Day Six on Buttress. Up very wearily at 2:30 am, determined to help Paul and Robert carry and to lead the next pitch up . . . Very slow. Pain under ribs. Cough. Sore throat. Legs like lead. Weight of 100-metre rope, gas stoves and food. Counting rope—now twelve of them in place, mostly 100 metres—like doing a major alpine route two days running, with only five or six hours' sleep in between. And at much higher altitude."

Venables later glories in the mixture of climbing terrain he gets to lead—rock, mixed and pure ice. The group makes excellent progress, with only short bouts of bad weather, well-timed to enforce rest days. Once the group surmounts the main buttress (to the left of the American buttress of 1983), the mood quickly changes to one of hard-driven exhilaration. Climbing a particularly sheer ice face, Venables exalts: "And what an ice pitch! . . . poised . . . as if on a crest of a gigantic wave about to crash down into the Kangshung basin. All my tiredness vanished and I raced on adrenalin, stabbing my way maniacally upwards as the clouds closed in, swirling grey around the Kangshung cirque."

Eventually they get to the South Col. Paul Teare is stricken with altitude sickness but within a few hours recovers enough to climb down alone. The remaining three struggle to begin their summit attempt, but they are struck by lassitude. Before midnight they leave the tent and climb through the night but the combination of wind and altitude has taken much of the heart out of them. Each spends what seems like hours sitting down to rest while precious time races by.

As Venables plods upward, Everest ghosts flutter before his eyes. When he approaches the South Summit, it is Tenzing Norgay and Raymond Lambert of the Swiss expedition of 1952 who pass into view. As he surmounts this foresummit, Evans and Bourdillon appear, who ended their attempt at this point in 1953 because of insufficient oxygen and deteriorating weather. Tenzing Norgay, this time with Hillary, rises in his mind's eye as he contemplates the Hillary Step. Hillary was able to wedge his way up while Dougal Haston floundered in deep powder snow. Venables is delighted to discover that he can climb the step which is in good condition. And finally the summit: "I wanted to savour that precious moment, storing away what memories I could in my feeble oxygen-starved brain. It would be nice to say that it was the happiest moment of my life and that I was overwhelmed with euphoria; but that would be a gross exaggeration, for at the time there was only a rather dazed feeling of—'Isn't it strange?'"

As he turns to leave, Everest's largest ghost—George Mallory—appears. Venables hurries down, not anxious to share his fate. If the ascent was carried out in a dream, the descent becomes a nightmare. A different cast of ghosts appears: Mick Burke who disappeared on the summit ridge; Peter Habeler, in terror of suffering high-altitude brain damage; Hannelore Schmatz, whose ice-encased body sat on the route for years.

Unable to continue down in the dark and nearly comatose with fatigue, Venables bivouacs in the open that still night at 8500 meters. The next morning he meets up with his companions farther down. They have a similar story to tell. They kept falling asleep. Ed Webster had reached the South Summit and realized clearly that this was the moment to turn back. Robert Anderson, an hour behind, passed Ed and attained the South Summit only to become disoriented. Ed and Robert had retreated halfway down to the South Col, reaching an abandoned Asian tent just as darkness fell.

Together all three descend to their tents on the col, melt a meager ration of water, lick their wounds and collapse. Ed Webster is the worst off. His fingers are purple with frostbite and he surmises—but cannot remember clearly—that the damage must have occurred during a dawn photography session. They cannot bring themselves to leave the comfort of their tiny tents, but finally Ed cajoles his companions to don their climbing gear and move down. For safety each climbs separately, for none could hold the other in a fall. The descent is a vivid nightmare.

In this intensely told epic of conquest and descent, the issue of how much risk climbers are justified in taking is writ large, but not deeply analyzed. Venables does not preach but describes with great realism what happened. There is not a word of psycho-babble.

While realistic and detailed, his description of the retreat below the South Col was obtained only after painstaking reconstruction after interviewing each of the climbers. Severe amnesia affected them all. Their ragged and broken states of mind raise some troubling questions. If one climbs to experience the pleasure of it, it is done to please oneself. If one cannot remember a sensational climb because it was oxygenless, does it become only a remarkable feat done to please others? In this vein the question "Why do you climb?" would be better asked "For whom do you climb?" Or is the residual sense of enormous achievement reward enough?

Stephen Venables has a wonderful knack for explaining how he surmounts a climbing problem without seeming to be writing a textbook. Serious climbers will find a trove of techniques to study which are described clearly enough for non-climbers to understand. Climbers or not, all will be interested in this mountaineering thriller of a tiny band pulling off an incredible victory, an account so stirring it will be put down only to obtain a moment's breather. It is a story that will take its place along with other outstanding sagas of Everest—Norton's *The Fight for Everest, 1924*, Lord Hunt's *The Ascent of Everest*, Hornbein's *Everest, The West Ridge* and Bonington's *Everest the Hard Way*.

The book is elegantly designed by long-time Everest publishers, Hodder & Stoughton, with 48 pages of breath-taking color photographs, all beautifully printed. Detail photos lead the reader carefully along the route. The quality of the photography is outstanding and does much to prove what an extraordinary accomplishment these four climbers achieved.

THOMAS HOLZEL

The Art of Adventure. Galen Rowell. Collins Publishers, San Francisco, 1989. 166 pages, 127 color photographs. \$45.00.

There is no doubt that Galen Rowell is one of the great photographers of the world. This is clearly apparent in this new and gorgeous coffee-table book. The superb composition of each photograph, the clarity of detail, the excellent quality of the reproductions all contribute to making this an exceptionally beautiful volume. The 10 by 14-inch format makes it possible to show many of the pictures double-paged, increasing their effectiveness.

Galen Rowell combines his skills of photography with being one of the outstanding American mountaineers. For that reason, climbers will find this album of particular interest, for it is primarily in the mountains or in mountainous areas that most of the photographs were taken. The mountain scenery and the climbing shots are outstanding. Many are what might be called "mood shots" taken at sunrise, sundown or in threatening and inclement weather. However, some of the ones which are most striking are incredibly natural shots of animals in the wild. His pictures of mountain peoples show a great feeling of sympathy with them. In his many years of photography, Rowell has been in many unusual and out-of-the-way places. Represented are photographs taken in his native