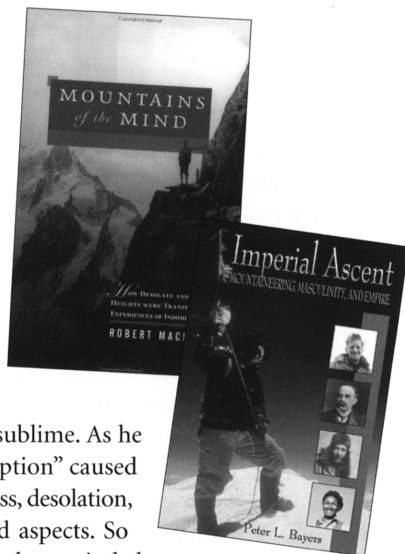


Mountains of the Mind. ROBERT MACFARLANE. NEW YORK: PANTHEON BOOKS, 2003. 320 PAGES. HARDCOVER. \$24.00

Imperial Ascent: Mountaineering, Masculinity, and Empire. PETER L. BAYERS. BOULDER: UNIVERSITY PRESS OF COLORADO, 2003. 174 PAGES. HARDCOVER. \$29.95.

These two books have a common goal: to describe the cultural and historical factors that gave mountaineering form and meaning. But they go about it very differently. Let's start with Macfarlane's more familiar approach, a survey of the mostly literary influences that over three centuries transformed the European view of mountains from grotesque to enchanted, from the demonic to the sublime. As he writes on page 18, this "tremendous revolution in perception" caused "qualities for which mountains were once reviled—steepness, desolation, perilousness—to be numbered among their most prized aspects. So drastic was this revolution that to contemplate it now is to be reminded of a truth about landscape: that our responses to [it] are for the most part culturally devised . . . we do not see what is there, but largely what we think is there." And on page 165, about an early casualty on Mont Blanc, an American named Henry Bean: "He was sent to his death by ways of feeling set in motion many years before his birth. Because the ways we perceive and react to the forms of landscape are prompted, primed and reminded by those who have gone before, no death in the mountain is isolated from historical circumstance. Although we might like to believe that our experience at altitude is utterly individual, each of us is in fact heir to a complex and largely j Predecessors who, in their turn, were influenced by the likes of de Saussure, Shelley, Wordsworth, Byron, Petrarch, Coleridge, Edmund Burke, Albert Smith, Ruskin, Bachelard, John Muir, and others whom Macfarlane discusses from the impressively wide reading one might expect from a fellow of Emmanuel College, Cambridge. To manifest the power of his antecedents, he interpolates recollection from his own experience in the hills of Scotland, the Alps, and the Tien Shan.

Macfarlane is a writer with more charm than intellectual rigor. His opening premise is not satisfactorily substantiated, in part because he cannot turn down a good digression. He writes with such brio that one hardly notices the transitions from topic to topic, the haphazard melding of the personal and the academic. Sometimes, however, the writing skills and the aliveness of his mind don't quite justify the diversions from theme—a discussion of children's literature, say, or a solipsistic rant about climbing fatalities, or an insert about Chinese scholars' rocks. But soon, like a clever magpie, Macfarlane proffers another seductive tidbit and the reader is entertained again. For example, during a hurried tour of the history of cartography he says the following with customary style and authority: "The Jungfrau and the Eiger were christened in the eleventh and twelfth centuries respectively, but it was during the 1800s that the micro-naming properly began. Niches, notches, shoulders, cols, ridges, glaciers, routes: all began to bear the names of climbers and explorers. Look at a large-scale map of the Alps now, and you will see the names jostling for space, radiating out of geological features like small black spokes."



In contrast, Bayers is an academic of an unamusing type. His sources are the likes of Foucault, Barthes, Terry Eagleton, Edward Said. From which anyone who has studied literature of the humanities in the last 20 years will know that we are in a country called “postmodernism.” Appropriately therefore, this is a book about texts. Seven in fact: three about climbing Denali (Cook, Browne, and Stuck); and four about Everest (Younghusband, John Hunt, Tenzing Norgay, and Krakauer). These are all critiqued for the light they shed on the tropes of masculinity and imperialism. One needs a stomach for academic prose, but I found the going worth the effort, especially the dissection of Younghusband’s chest-thumping *The Epic of Mount Everest* (1926) and the vestiges of the Empire in Hunt’s *The Ascent of Everest* (1953). Of the former he says: “Through his portrayal of Mallory and Irvine’s deaths, Younghusband’s narrative capitalizes on the public sentiment towards the now idealized body of the dead male soldier [dead in the trenches of WWI]. Their warrior bodies lying high on the slopes of Everest represent the physical courage of their lived actions ...” Of the latter, Bayers illuminates how: “Hunt is caught between his desires to legitimate Britain’s imperial traditions while also trying to distance the expedition from the pejorative connotations of imperialism [and] in the end the narrative celebrates the masculine imperial ethos of the adventure tradition.” The weakest chapter is the last. Krakauer’s *Into Thin Air* is unconvincingly shoehorned into the argument by conflating imperialism with globalization and its Third World effects.

The message here is that there are more determinants of the climbing experience than you can shake a piton at. History, literature, culture, ideology, aesthetics—all bear on the motivation to climb. That’s worth remembering in the light of the contemporary emphasis on the psychological. Remember the next time you tie onto a rope: there are ancient ghosts in the air.

JOHN THACKRAY

Where the Mountain Casts Its Shadow: The Dark Side of Extreme Adventure. MARIA COFFEY. NEW YORK: ST. MARTIN’S PRESS, 2003. 234 PAGES. HARDCOVER. \$23.95.

You expect a lot from a book that garners awards at the Banff Mountain Book Festival. And *Where the Mountain Casts Its Shadow* delivers. The book tackles an unusual, historically under-examined subject in mountaineering literature: What is life like as a top high altitude mountaineer? What is the impact of that life on loved ones—partner, children, and parents—during the climber’s life and after he (or she) is gone?

To get answers, Coffey interviewed many top climbers or their survivors—Conrad Anker, Chris Bonington, Anatoli Boukreev, Kitty Calhoun, John Harlin III, Lynn Hill, Alex Lowe, Joe Simpson, Ed Viesturs, and Jim Wickwire, to name but a few—and exhaustively researched the book with an impressive roster of noted sociologists, psychologists, and historians.

If Coffey’s approach sounds clinical—about as exciting as watching a belay—rest assured, it’s anything but. This book is a page-turner: Coffey’s writing style is direct and ferociously honest, while her use of emotionally gripping anecdotes infuses an engaging, novelistic feel. Hollywood couldn’t script stories more wrenching or ennobling than the death of Chris Kerrebrock in a

