I confess my initial reaction to hearing the title of Clint Willis’ latest offering was something along the lines of, oh god, do we really need another book about Chris Bonington and company? After all, in the four decades since the publication of Bonington’s *I Chose to Climb*, he has been nothing if not prolific as a chronicler of his own climbing career, amassing a pile of titles that includes such classics of expeditionary narrative as *Annapurna South Face* and *Everest: The Hard Way*. And many of the “Bonington Boys,” the cohort of British climbers who accompanied him to the Eiger, Annapurna, Everest, Changabang, and elsewhere in the 1960s, 70s and 80s, have offered their own accounts of the accomplishments of what Willis terms “climbing’s greatest generation,” ranging from Dougal Haston’s terse *In High Places* to Pete Boardman’s lyric *The Shining Mountain*. And, if all that doesn’t suffice, we also have Jim Curran’s fine 1999 biography, *High Achiever: The Life and Climbs of Chris Bonington*.

But it turns out there is room for at least one more book about Bonington and his mates. Willis, whose many publishing credits include editing a series in which several of Bonington’s expedition books are reprinted, is a knowledgeable student of recent mountaineering. He proves himself equally adept at discussing innovations in climbing technique and the manufacture of climbing celebrities—both considerations equally relevant to a discussion of Chris Bonington’s significance to mountaineering history.

If you don’t happen to have the collected works of Chris Bonington close at hand, and want an abbreviated compendium of his greatest climbs, *The Boys of Everest* is an excellent substitute. Willis’ writing has a breathless you-are-there quality that puts the reader next to the climber on the mountain’s face as he tackles one challenging pitch after another, with occasional forays on the part of the author into the climber’s mind and emotions. “Chris felt surprisingly strong this morning,” Willis writes of the second day of Bonington’s first ascent of Mount Blanc’s Central Pillar of Frêney in 1961, in the company of Don Whillans, Ian Clough, and Jan Dlugosz. “[I]n any case, he planned on aiding the crack. He did so by taking pebbles from the back of the crack, and wedging them into place, then threading slings around the pebbles. That done, he clipped his etriers—the loops of webbing that could serve as awkward steps—to the slings and then stood in the steps to gain height.” Note the effortless insertion into the text of that critical bit of technical arcana, the definition of etriers, without breaking narrative stride.

Willis offers an equally astute assessment of Bonington’s emergence as the public face of British mountaineering in the 1960s, a process which received a powerful boost from a BBC television special devoted to his climb of The Old Man of Hoy in Scotland’s Orkney Islands:
“The broadcast, aired live in the summer of 1967, was a huge hit—perhaps the most widely watched climbing film since the one that documented the 1953 first ascent of Everest. Chris—with his youth, his upscale accent and his earnest desire to appeal to his audience—made an especially pleasing impression on the millions of viewers who tuned in.” Bonington was not the only one of his contemporaries with telegenic charisma. As Willis notes, Dougal Haston was often compared to one or another sixties pop-star. Unlike Dougal and so many of his contemporaries, however, Bonington was not given to pub-brawls. As a result, there was a knighthood in his future, while it’s inconceivable there ever would have been a Sir Dougal.

The Boys of Everest is both entertaining and enlightening. I am bothered by only two aspects of the book. One is Willis’ decision to present us with the final moments of the many Bonington Boys who died while climbing. “He made a mistake and he is ready to forgive it, but there is no apparent need,” Willis writes, for example, of the moment after Mick Burke broke through a cornice on his descent from Everest’s summit in 1975, and plunged thousands of feet downwards toward the Kangshung Glacier. “He’s grateful for that, but he is distracted. He is swimming in a blue, blue light—it reminds him of something—and the snow keeps falling; the flakes touch the ocean and vanish.” Well, perhaps. Or perhaps all he experienced was stark terror. We’ll never know, and it would have been better, more tasteful certainly, not to go there.

The other problem lies with the notion offered in Willis’ sub-title, but never really explained or justified in the book, that his subject is “climbing’s greatest generation.” How could any meaningful definition of “greatest” exclude the generations of Himalayan climbers who made their reputations from the 1930s through the 1950s—Eric Shipton, Bill Tilman, Raymond Lambert, Herbert Tichy, Ricardo Cassin, Walter Bonatti, Hermann Buhl, Lionel Terray, Charlie Houston? When the Bonington Boys climbed Annapurna by its South Face in 1970 they changed the calculus for the possible in Himalayan climbing. But was theirs a “greater” achievement than the original ascent of the mountain in 1950, the first time an 8,000-meter peak had ever been climbed? As Bonington himself noted in Annapurna South Face, with the generosity to predecessors that characterizes his books, “when Maurice Herzog and his team arrived at the foot of Annapurna in 1950, their biggest problem was finding a route onto the mountain. We didn’t even need a map to find ours.” As far as determining degrees of greatness goes, Sir Isaac Newton said it best back in 1676: “If I have seen further it is by standing on ye shoulders of Giants.”

MAURICE ISSERMAN


Midway through their lives’ journeys, two former Camp 4 dirtbags, Hugh and Lewis, find themselves in a dark wood at the base of El Cap; the forests and walls of their youth now transformed into a macabre dreamscape, complete with a prophesizing wildman, witches and mysterious screams—a tangle of savage birds, lost souls, nightmares and menacing visions. This Dantesque vision rises out of the modern-day setting with a seamlessness that proves, once more, Jeff Long’s ability to forge a sense of authentic myth—and in the process to tell a gripping story.

Readers of his cult novel, Angels of Light, will recognize certain familiar elements: a motley