Fallen Giants: A History of Himalayan Mountaineering from the Age of Empire to the Age of Extremes

by Maurice Isserman and Stewart Weaver, with maps and peak sketches by De Molenaar.
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Maurice Isserman and Stewart Weav-
er's authoritative history of Himalayan mountaineering, Fallen Giants, starts right at the beginning, 45 million years ago, with the collision of tectonic plates that threw up what the authors call “the greatest geophysical feature of the earth.” The Andes are the longest of the planet’s mountain chains, but the Himalaya and its adjacent ranges, the Karakoram and the Hindu Kush, are far higher. They contain all fourteen of the world’s peaks over eight thousand meters, or 26,247 feet; their northern range averages 19,685 feet—some five thousand feet higher than the Andes—and they are still growing: “To this day India plows into Tibet at the breakneck speed of five centimeters a year and lifts the Himalaya by as much as a centimeter.”

That little detail is characteristic of the book. Both authors are enthusiastic mountaineers who climb regularly in the United States and have gone trekking in the Himalaya, but they climb for pleasure, not for a living. Away from the hills, they are historians—Isserman has written extensively about American communism and the New Left; Weaver’s field is British imperial history and English liberalism—and they bring their professional skills and discipline to the subject in the form of meticulous research and a painstaking attention to detail. Fallen Giants is a big book in every sense—nearly 460 pages of text, eighty-five pages of notes, and a twenty-five-page bibliography—and the authors’ political take on the subject makes it unlike most other mountain histories.

Political historians do not usually bother with a subject as esoteric and seemingly frivolous as climbing, although mountaineering books are now accumulating as relentlessly as the Himalaya itself. A mere half-century ago, mountain climbing was still a minority pastime for an eccentric few who took pleasure in doing things the hard way, in steep places and bad weather, and were willing to risk injury or death in the process. Since risk and the adrenaline high that went with it were an essential part of its appeal, climbing was regarded as a questionable, slightly antisocial activity. As a result, climbs were regarded as a centimeter.”

Ruskin was invited to lecture to the Alpine Club in 1865, seven years after its foundation, he used the occasion to denounce its members as Philistines:

You have despised nature [and] all the deep and sacred sensations of natural scenery…. The French revolutionists made stables of the cathedrals of France; you have made racecourses of the cathedrals of the earth…. The Alps themselves, which your own poets used to love so fervently, you look upon as soaked poles in bear gardens, which you set yourselves to climb and slide down again, with “shrieks of delight.”

Isserman and Weaver, being finely tuned to social distinctions and crushing British snobbery, interpret Ruskin’s denunciation as a class distinction: “His remark dripped with class condescension,” they say. I wonder. Ruskin had a talent for vituperation, but his venom on this occasion had nothing to do with “class condescension” for the simple reason that, socially, there was no difference between him and his audience. The members of the Alpine Club were professional men—scientists, doctors, clergymen, lawyers, soldiers, even a few writers—gentlemen who could afford to travel to the Alps and stay there for as long they pleased, just like Ruskin himself.

There were differences between them, of course, but temperament aside, they were differences of nurture, not nature. Ruskin had been privately educated at home by tutors, whereas most of the founding members of the Alpine Club had suffered the rigors of a board school education designed to train the right kind of men to administer the British Empire. A taste for strenuous exercise, adventure, and deprivation had been beaten into them along with Greek and Latin, and mountaineering was a perfect way of satisfying it. “The authentic Englishman,” Leslie Stephen wrote cheerfully, “is one to whom it’s all day among rocks and snow; and to come as near breaking his neck as his conscience will allow.” For Ruskin, art critic and lover of mountain landscapes, snobbery, of course, figured large in “the intensely status-conscious eyes of the Raj,” far larger, in fact, than the mountains themselves. Especially, in the first half of the nineteenth century, when no sensible person dreamed of climbing them for pleasure. For Victorians, the Himalaya was important as a natural frontier, and mapping and measuring it was a handy way of laying claim to the territory. Hence the Great Trigonometrical Survey of India, which involved the “grid-iron” of triangulated calculations of the heights and positions of all the peaks. Like every other Himalayan enterprise before them, the mapping was a bone-wearying business, involving hardship, brute labor, cold, hunger, and exhaustion, as well as technical skill in using heavy equipment such as sight poles, which was done, according to the 15,000-to-20,000-foot summits.

The survey was a triumph of doggedness over adversity and also a major step in establishing the boundaries of the Raj. While the work was in progress, the cartographers either numbered the peaks or used the local names. When all the measurements had been

The grandest of the early Himalayan expeditions, and also the least eccentric: the camp of Luigi Amadeo, Duke of the Abruzzi, and his team below the west face of K2, 1909; photograph by Vittorio Sella, ‘one of the greatest of all mountain photographers,’ from Maurice Isserman and Stewart Weaver’s Fallen Giants

axes and arcane gear such as camming devices and offset nuts. The Victorians were responsible for turning the Alps into what Leslie Stephens called “the playground of Europe,” but it was an exclusive playground for a limited few. One hundred and fifty years later, the Himalaya is in danger of becoming the playground of the developed world. As of August 1, 2008, 2,090 people have stood on the top of Everest. Both the South Col route that took John Hunt’s 1953 expedition six weeks to pioneer and the North Col route on which George Leigh Mallory and Andrew Irvine died in 1924 have been climbed from base camp to summit, solo and without oxygen, in less than seventeen hours. The mountain has also been climbed by a blind man, a teenager, and a sixty-four-year-old; it has been descended by skiers and snowboarders, floated down by paragliders, and flown over by balloonists. The problem with Everest is no longer how to get up it but how to descend—[which] thus provided . . . a perpetual reminder of the gods—the Tibetan name for Everest is Cho-molungma, “Goddess Mother of the World”—and their summits were forbidden to mere mortals. In Europe, superstitious Alpine peasants believed mountain tops were the abodes of witches, devils, and dragons. Lowland- ers and people of sense chose to ignore the peaks, dismissing them as mere inconveniences—“considerable protuberances,” Dr. Johnson called them—put there to make life difficult for the civilized traveler.

According to Isserman and Weaver, the general change in European attitudes toward mountains began around the middle of the eighteenth century with the Gothic revival, the cult of the picturesque, and Edmund Burke’s aesthetic distinction between the Beautiful—the regular, the proportioned, the visually predictable—and the Sublime—the dramatic, the unexpected, the awe inspiring—[which] thus provided … a ready vocabulary for the novel experience of mountain wonder.

For aesthetes, appreciating the beauty of the Alps was altogether different from climbing them. When John Ruskin was invited to lecture to the
If anything, those qualities were tested to a breaking point during World War I, then tested again at high altitude in the Himalaya. Everest offered “a few lucky survivors one more chance to die gracefully for their country,” and they did so in the same dogged way in which they had fought the war: 1,000 feet lower it were Everest “1,000 feet lower it would have been climbed in 1924. Were it 1,000 feet higher it would have been an engineering problem,” said Peter Lloyd, a member of another unsuccessful Everest expedition, in 1938. At 29,000 feet, Everest is already nudging the jet stream; if winter comes early the jet stream drops to a centimeter above the earth and from 26,000, the temperature drops with it, and the wind blows so fiercely that it is hard to move at all, let alone to climb. T"
style that they climbed in the Alps: casually and sportingly, in the spirit of adventure, and strictly as amateurs, with inadequate clothing—tweed and wool—turned out to be the perfect equipment; Mallory used oxygen but would have preferred not to because he thought it was cheating. Like other members of the Alpine Club, he also disdained newfangled Continental gear like pitons and carabiners, "those conjoined miracles of simple technology," Isserman and Weaver call them, "that made possible the placing of points of belay on an otherwise sheer face." With equipment like that, steeper, more daring routes were possible, but it wasn't trench warfare, and it wasn't sporting, so they left the newfangled to Continental climbers.

The Germans had already climbed outrageously hard north faces in the Alps and now, in the wake of military defeat and the vengeful Versailles Treaty, they wanted to restore their national pride by climbing a major Himalayan peak. The 1926 team was led by Paul Bauer, one of Hitler's early converts, the mountain he chose was Kangchhenjunga, and the route was brutal—harder and crazier than anything that had been attempted before. His team performed wonders, tunneling under ice towers they couldn't climb, digging ice caves when they couldn't pitch tents, and they seemed poised for the summit until the always unpredictable Himalayan weather suddenly changed:

A violent blizzard struck the ridge, pinned them down for three days, and finally forced them into a memorable death-defying retreat…but not before [Bauer] had infinitely raised the technical standard of Himalayan mountaineering and restored to his own satisfaction the tarnished honor of his countrymen.

Bauer's example encouraged other climbers who had no taste for over-equipped, military-style expeditions. Foremost among them were Bill Tilman and Eric Shipton, two free spirits who traveled light, climbed for pleasure rather than national glory, and were the first British climbers to treat their Sherpas as equals. Shipton's words, as "fellow mountaineers rather than servants." Tilman was a shy, taciturn man, famous for his spartan habits and austere practical judgment on anything beyond what is needed for efficiency and safety is worse than useless"; and "any expedition that cannot be planned on the back of a used envelope is over-organized." Both of them had the British gift for understatement: they went on "trips," not "expeditions," though their antics make a depressing end to a pastime for misfits. Yet para-doxically, one of the pleasures of climbing is companionship, which old-timers used to call "the spirit of the hills" and the French called une aventure de cordée: that is, two climbers roped together, each relying on the other, sometimes in dicey situations. It's also expected to be fun, though no one ever went to climb in the Himalaya with that in mind. The mountains are too big, too high, too remote. Unlike the Alps, they have no strategically placed refuge huts, no cable cars to shorten the up-hill slog, and no comforts at all to alleviate the squallor, drudgery, and sheer exhaustion of life at high altitude and in intense cold in a place where there is only rock and snow and ice, and nothing ever grows. In such harsh environments minor tics become intolerable intrusions, and even the best of friends may end up enemies.

Mountaineering has traditionally been a pastime for misfits. Yet paradoxically, one of the pleasures of climbing is companionship, which old-timers used to call "the spirit of the hills" and the French called une aventure de cordée: that is, two climbers roped together, each relying on the other, sometimes in dicey situations. It's also expected to be fun, though no one ever went to climb in the Himalaya with that in mind. The mountains are too big, too high, too remote. Unlike the Alps, they have no strategically placed refuge huts, no cable cars to shorten the uphill slog, and no comforts at all to alleviate the squallor, drudgery, and sheer exhaustion of life at high altitude and in intense cold in a place where there is only rock and snow and ice, and nothing ever grows. In such harsh environments minor tics become intolerable intrusions, and even the best of friends may end up enemies.

Once upon a time, the psychopathology of expedition life was a problem climbers kept to themselves. But manners change and these days, when travel is cheap and climbers go to the Himalaya with as little fanfare as they go to the Alps or the Rockies, bad blood and outrageous behavior are the new fashion. They make good copy and help sell what Isserman and Weaver call "climb and tell" books in which "bruised feelings and simmering resentments were beginning to replace frostbite and hypoxia as the signature ailments of high-altitude mountaineering." Here is an example of the new style spirit of the hills during the disastrous 1996 season on Everest in which eight people died:

Three Indian climbers were trapped high on the Northeast Ridge on May 10, and early the next morning a Japanese party intent on the summit walked past them, though they were still alive. By the time the Japanese descended, one of the climbers was dead, another missing, and a third barely alive and tangled in his rope. They removed the rope from the survivor but made no effort to help him down the mountain. He too would die. "Above eight thousand meters," one of the Japanese climbers offered by way of self-justification, "is not a place where people can afford morality."

Aleister Crowley would doubtless have been proud of them and Jerry Springer might have used them on his show, but their antics make a depressing end to a fine book by two mountain lovers with a strong sense of right and wrong.
The Himalayas (also Himalaya, IPA: [hɪˈmɔːliə], [ˌhɪməˈleɪjə]) are a mountain range in Asia, separating the Indian subcontinent from the Tibetan Plateau. By extension, Himalayas is also the name of the massive mountain system which includes the Himalaya proper, the Karakoram, the Hindu Kush, and a host of minor ranges extending from the Pamir Knot. The name "Himalaya" means "the abode of snow" in Sanskrit. The Himalayas is home to many of the world’s highest peaks (including Everest). This guide provides everything you need to know about this mountain range. The Himalayas range is home to many of the world’s highest peaks, including the Mount Everest, the highest mountain in the world above sea-level. This guide will tell you everything you need to know about this famous mountain range in Asia, as well as the most notable Himalayan mountains and hikes.

Quick Navigation:
1. Himalayas refer to a mountain range and not a single mountain. The Himalayan mountain range is the youngest on this planet.
2. Though they are the youngest, they are pretty old. They were formed 70 million years ago and were an outcome of same geological activities that have tore apart our continents over billions of years.
3. The Himalayas were formed when the Eurasian tectonic plate collided with the Indo-Australian tectonic plate (which has now broken down into the Australian plate and the Indian plate).