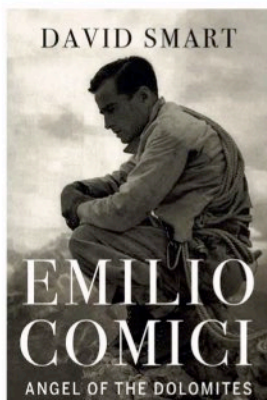

Reviews



'Toby's Point, Arymer Cove, Devon', Hilda Hechle, c1920, watercolour. 28cm x 39cm. Near Ringmore, south Devon.
(Courtesy of Tony Astill/www.mountainpaintings.org)

Reviews



Emilio Comici

Angel of the Dolomites

David Smart

RMB, 2020, pp248, £31

On 7 August 1915, as the summer sun bleached the fields of northern Italy, the poet and proto-fascist Gabriele D'Annunzio arrived over the port of Trieste in a flimsy biplane piloted by his friend Giuseppe Miraglia. The white city, D'Annunzio noted, shone against the backdrop of the Carso, the limestone plateau that traditionally divided Italians from Slovenes and offered Triestino climbers a training ground for the challenges of the Dolomites.

From his cockpit, D'Annunzio, then in his early fifties, released bombs on Austrian submarines floating in the harbour and also threw packets of messages – garnished with green, white and red ribbons bought from a Venetian haberdashery – to the people below who were watching the air raid from Trieste's main piazza. Written in D'Annunzio's florid style, they promised that soon the Italian tricolour would fly over the castle of San Giusto, the city's heart. Irredentists, desperate to be free of Austrian rule and part of a reunified Italy, stood in the streets and cheered during later bombing raids, despite the risks.

There's no evidence that Emilio Comici watched this first air sortie over his city, but it's safe to say that if he didn't then he would have heard all about it, and would have revelled in its daring. In this fascinating biography, improbably the first for such a titan of 1930s climbing, David Smart makes it clear that news of Italian success left Comici exhilarated. How could it not? Italians in the city had chafed for centuries under rule from Vienna, whose brutality they blamed for the war. Plus, he was 14 years old and already vulnerable to the romance of adventure. Italian boys' clubs were shut down by the authorities so they had more time on their hands to dream of freedom. Always a bit of a *mammone*, a mummy's boy, he would strum the family's mandolin as she made his dinner and sing about their beloved city, and how it fretted under the Austrian heel.

Among the names that would have thrilled the teenage Comici was Napoleone Cozzi, a brilliant pre-war climber who made the Val Rosandra just outside Trieste a training ground, a *palestra*, where a young alpinist could perfect the skills required for the hard new climbs being put up in the Dolomites by such great names as Paul Preuss, Angelo Dibona and Tita Piaz, the so-called 'devil of the Dolomites'. And it was in the Val Rosandra that



Looking good. Left: Emilio Comici in his signature climbing jacket and basketball shoes at Val Rosandra outside Trieste. Right: With journalist and occasional benefactor Severino Casara and good friend Emmy Hartwich-Brioschi, who had been Paul Preuss' lover, at Lake Misurina in 1935.

Comici would start on his path to fame, if not fortune. But as Smart makes clear, Cozzi was also an irredentist, famous for his arrest in 1904 and subsequent trial in Vienna after Austrian secret police discovered what are now called IEDs hidden under the floorboards of the Trieste Gymnastics Society. Years later, during the war, when Comici walked those same floorboards, notions of climbing and adventure were inextricably fused in his mind with the nationalist, irredentist cause that so inspired him.

Politics, however, was moving on rapidly. The colourful, ludicrous extravagance of Gabriele D'Annunzio had morphed into something new and darker. In October 1922, while Comici was doing his national service, Mussolini's fascists levered their way to power. Already a member of the Associazione XXX Ottobre, the date news of Austria's defeat reached Trieste, Comici joined Mussolini's party and became one of the *squadristi*, a black shirt. Something in the fascist aesthetic appealed to Comici, a climber who would have understood very well how to use Instagram: it was modern, clean and seemingly progressive, and well dressed, like he was: so unlike the well-heeled romanticism of Mitteleuropian alpinists like Julius Klugy, long a mentor to successive generations of alpinists in Trieste, including Cozzi. For a working-class climber like Comici, the future seemed elsewhere. After he climbed his eponymous route on the Cima Grande, one of the most striking landmarks in the history of alpinism, he wrote in the hut book: 'By the

same light that illuminates the value and tenacity of the Italians of Mussolini, we have opened the path to the north face of the Tre Cime di Lavaredo.'

There is a great deal to recommend this book, not least David Smart's ability to paint a broad canvas without exhausting the reader's attention. All this historical perspective is not only fascinating and rich with detail, but also necessary, because of the equivocal place Comici holds in the climbing firmament, the glamorous risk-taker adding sheen to Mussolini's project. At times, Smart strains a little too hard to excuse Comici's political allegiances, although I think mostly he gets it right. I would like to have heard more from Comici's near-contemporaries on this; Fosco Maraini famously tore up his fascist party membership card when his father enrolled him. Comici, on the other hand, averted his gaze. Towards the end of the book, Smart writes:

Even after the Trieste section of the CAI hung signs forbidding Jews in its huts, Emilio had fretted over the predicament of his Jewish friends, not as if racism was a core program of his beloved party (which, after 1938, it was), but as if it was some kind of unintended oversight by a regime he saw as benevolent.

For much of this book, until its poignant and fatal conclusion, I wondered whether Smart's considerable talents would have been better deployed writing a history of the whole sixth-grade scene, which for English readers is woefully underexplored and yet forms the basis for the explosion of big-wall climbing in Yosemite and elsewhere after the war. Because Emilio Comici did seem to bob around on the surface of his own unusually interesting era, like a cork on a storm-tossed ocean. The portrayal of his childhood is, presumably through necessity, somewhat hurried. The poor leave little trace. But it's clear he had little meaningful education. That left him with a sense of inferiority, especially around some of his intellectual clients, and a lack of traction in the wider world.

Music was a comfort and a pleasure throughout his life and there is a wonderful scene towards the end of the book when, now living in the Dolomites, he takes up the piano under the instruction of one of his clients, Rita Palmquist, a Dane who had performed concerts all over Europe. Mussolini had tried to suppress folk songs and mandolin playing because they led to unmanly display of emotion. But Il Duce approved of the piano, which he could play himself. Comici had some natural talent and persevered, but learning the piano in his late thirties was understandably frustrating. After one lesson ended badly, Comici stood up and closed the lid, telling his teacher:

You have witnessed the most splendid symbol of my spiritual life. A closed door. You see, I have worked hard to develop my body, my muscles. I managed to do so, but at the detriment to my inner life. A few years ago, I thought I would be a writer, but it was an illusion. In the spiritual realm, there is a closed door for me.

Palmquist, understandably, was deeply moved at this declaration, the austere man of the mountains revealing briefly the torment beneath the surface, a man 'who some accused of turning climbing into a mechanical thing, was, in fact, deeply sensitive.' And the rest. Smart paints a convincing portrait of a man who was if anything hypersensitive, particularly to criticism. Like his beloved home city Trieste, Smart writes, Comici had a certain *distacco*, an aloofness from the world, and a self-sufficiency, or *lontananza*, that added to the impression that he was somewhere on a higher plane. 'There have been few more haunted alpinists,' Smart writes at one point. He's speaking of ghosts, but it stands for his character too.

This self-absorption, from an Alpine outsider like Comici, must have come across as arrogance to some, and petulant arrogance when the Dimai brothers were rude about him after the Cima Grande climb. Comici appealed to the fascist authorities for resolution, but they just shrugged and suggested he stand up for himself. Even when he took the initiative and soloed the north face to counter the Dimais' sniping, he had to spoil the effect by having another sulk. You want to shout at him across the decades: you made your point, Emilio, let it go! Enamoured of press attention but reluctant to engage through a natural shyness, Comici certainly suffered for his art. He wanted to be taken seriously as a man but often ended up as a symbol of something, of a legend that became a trap that slowly compressed him.

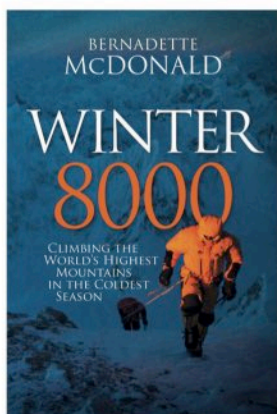
Perhaps that was what the piano playing was all about. It was also to please his ageing mother, a kindness the fascists would have frowned on as effeminate. One of the most striking aspects of this book is the ubiquity of women. They're everywhere in this story, a reminder that women have more often been excluded from the story of climbing, not the actual climbing. There's the Slovenian Mira 'Marko' Pibernik, as Smart calls her, although she preferred her maiden name Debelak, since her first marriage was arranged and soon discarded. A woman familiar to students of Ben Nevis history, she was on the first ascent of *Slav Route*. She'd also swung leads on the first ascent of the 900m north face of Jôf di Montasio. There's Riccardo Cassin's climbing partner Mary Varale, who brought Comici to Lecco to teach them pegging and later quit the CAI because of its blatant misogyny. Comici would take her on another truly great Tre Cime climb, the *Spigolo Giallo*. Anna Escher, one of his richest and most regular clients. And Emmy Hartwich-Brioschi, Paul Preuss' lover at the time of his death, introduced to Comici by their mutual friend, the rather flaky journalist Severino Casara. Paula Wiesinger is there, the first woman to climb grade VI in the Dolomites. Trieste itself was home to more women climbing grade VI than anywhere else in the world, in particular Bruna Bernadini, who rarely followed. Finally there was the celebrated poet Antonia Pozzi, another of Comici's clients, a brilliant young woman who faced her own demons. She took a long cool look at Comici and saw him high on his lonely perch among the mountains where '... you will only see/your rope/encased in ice/and your hard heart/among the pale spires.' She committed suicide

aged 26 but Comici, the 'sullen, poor, uneducated kid from the docklands of Trieste', seems not to have noticed.

Towards the end of his short life, Emilio Comici began to grasp more fully his place in the world, how the populism of men like Gabriele D'Annunzio had twisted the urge of all Italians to be free. Comici had gone to the Dolomites so that an Italian might, in his own country, surpass the achievements of the Germans there. Naïve perhaps, even self-regarding, but not I think necessarily malign. The only new route he climbed in the war, during which he served as a minor fascist functionary, was dedicated to Italo Balbo, Mussolini's great rival who had opposed Italy's Nazi-style race laws. Smart offers this as an indication that Comici's fascist ardour was cooling. I'm not so sure. Either way, we shall never know whether Comici would have joined Cassin, who'd had his own flirtation with fascism, in fighting with the partisans against the Nazis. Because shortly after the Angel of the Dolomites was dead.

'They will only get me in the end,' Comici wrote of the mountains even as his passion for climbing waned. Ironically, it was the *palestra* he created in Vallunga that did for him, a place where he could teach but also perform for an audience, a banal accident caused by a rotten rope. Having fallen 30m and struck his head, he stood up again, blood streaming down his face, the broken ends still clutched in his fist, before dropping dead on the ground. David Smart has done the English-speaking climbing world an immense service with this book, capturing all the grandeur and vanity of our sport and the politics that informs it, all trapped in the amber of the 1930s, that turbulent era that looks so much like our own.

Ed Douglas



Winter 8000

Climbing the World's Highest Mountains in the Coldest Season

Bernadette McDonald

Vertebrate Publishing, 2020, pp272, £24

Winter 8000 is the latest book from the prolific keyboard of Bernadette McDonald. Her love affair with stories emerging from Eastern Europe in general and the Poles in particular is once again central to this book. They were the first to climb in the greater Asian ranges in winter but over the past 40 years they have been joined by climbers from other nations who have also mastered 'the art of

suffering', the phrase coined by Voytek Kurtyka to describe what is needed to succeed in the Himalaya in winter. As new nationalities gained summits, the Polish dream of being the first nation on all the 8,000m summits in winter proved too much. To state the obvious, climbing 8,000m peaks in winter is likely the most dangerous form of mountaineering. The weather

is violently unpredictable throughout and becomes increasingly worse in the later winter months. Even fixed ropes ascents of the *voie normales* can become death traps. As McDonald writes:

Winter climbing in the highest mountains is acknowledged as fundamentally dangerous, even by those who are most passionate about it. Like religion, it has saints and martyrs, sacred and forbidden places. Thirteen of those sacred 8000ers have now been climbed. Will the lure of this special genre of high-altitude climbing fade when K2 is finally climbed in winter? Will the saints retire to their sofas and the martyrs fade into the history books? Or will the quest for better lines, faster times, smaller teams drive alpinists to keep returning in winter. But for those who are smitten with the 8000ers but abhor the growing crowds, will they increasingly choose the quiet season?

This rather loaded paragraph gives you a flavour of what to expect. McDonald makes it clear that it is difficult to distinguish between the saints and the martyrs. I recommend a pinch of salt be taken with some of the author's comments. She is shrewd not to take sides when the ramifications of tragedies lead to caustic breakdowns and the blame game, ramped up by an ill-informed press and the public. For the climbers themselves, the author does her best to find the human side of their stories, whether in success or failure and, all too often, tragedy. She reminds us that in the end all climbers are responsible for their own lives and families, as well as their comrades. But the choices become much more brutal in winter.

The book was published just a few months before K2 was climbed in January 2021. I'll come back to that later. What is clear is that there are an increasing number of climbers choosing the winter season to avoid the crowds experienced during pre and post monsoon on 8,000m peaks. Winter climbing is somewhat safer today than it was 40 years ago at the beginning of the winter story. Weather forecasts are pretty accurate. They alert climbers to windows of good weather almost down to the minute. Global warming means it is not as cold in the high mountains as in 1980 and helicopters mean rescue is possible even above base camp. All that said, the risks are still enormous.

The author openly admits she has written about fewer than half of all the winter expeditions on record. McDonald's skills as both a researcher and a writer are displayed in her ability to turn what might be a long list of mountain encounters into a series of enthralling stories from each of the 8,000m peaks, with each giant having a chapter dedicated to it, starting with Everest, the first 8,000er to be climbed in winter, with Leszek Cichy and Krzysztof Wielicki reaching the summit on 17 February 1980, the spearhead on a well planned and executed expedition led by the legendary Andrzej Zawada. Zawada is recognised internationally as the godfather of winter mountaineering. His vision begot and began the Polish quest to make first winter ascents of all the 8,000ers. He inspired a generation and beyond.

From the outset, there was controversy. For a start, what constitutes the



The price and prize of winter at 8,000m. Left: Cory Richards' self-portrait taken after surviving a massive avalanche on Gasherbrum II. Right: Simone Moro on the summit of Shishapangma in 2005. (*Cory Richards/Piotr Morawski*)

winter season? On Everest, the summit was reached outside the official Nepali definition of winter, that being the months of December and January only. But December often holds some of the best and benign climbing conditions, while February is most often and very much full-on winter. There have also been many first 'winter' ascents in March. And as knowledge about the winter months grew, some expeditions made use of November to place high camps and then complete ascents in December, avoiding worsening conditions after Christmas. Simone Moro and others claim that these ascents are cheating. Rules are rules, but what if none are agreed? And moral codes are wonderful until the primal drive for survival takes over.

McDonald recalls an encounter with Zawada in 1994 when she asked why he preferred winter mountaineering to summer. His response was, 'because the Himalaya in summer is for vimmen.' I can picture the twinkle in his eye as he said this. But Polish motives to climb in winter are much more complex. During the communist years, Polish climbers could expect better food on expeditions than they enjoyed at home. With each climbing success, the adulation of the public increased and also the opportunities to travel and break free from the drudgeries of work to go on state-sponsored trips.

Sadly, over the next three decades the dream turned sour. As the Wielicki generation grew older, less experienced climbers were drafted into the Polish 'mission' to be the first. Then, as other nationalities entered the game and enjoyed success, competition grew. The Poles took more chances and inevitably lives were lost, culminating on Broad Peak in 2013. One of Poland's national heroes, Maciej Berbeka, died high on the mountain and accusations of poor leadership, personal misjudgement and abandonment filled the national press. Similar stories followed, and not just for the Poles.

The author's intimate knowledge and friendship with many of the individuals in this book makes the story telling all the more powerful, and heartfelt. She remains unjudgmental in most instances, although one can detect distaste for some of the egotistic excesses of Simone Moro. To his credit, Moro has become one of the great winter mountaineers, with four winter firsts to his name: Shishapangma in 2005; Makalu in 2009; Gasherbrum II in 2011; and Nanga Parbat in 2016. McDonald also takes pains to describe the very different nature of the large well-financed expeditions compared to some of the small alpine-style trips of lesser-known climbers. These alpine style trips are more likely to end in failure and tragedy, best exemplified by the loss of Tom Ballard and Daniele Nardi on the Mummery Rib of Nanga Parbat in March 2019. Had they climbed the route, often described as 'suicidal' by experienced observers of Nanga Parbat, it would indeed have been a remarkable first. The route has never been climbed in summer or winter. Their loss is an example of pure alpinism leading to the most terrible conclusion.

In his review for the *Scottish Mountaineering Club Journal*, Sandy Allan points out that all the individual and personal stories in *Winter 8000* could and should have been told by the climbers themselves. I agree with this, but the reality is that a market for these stories exists only in certain countries and Britain is not one of them. To this reviewer, it seems that the topic of mountaineering is increasingly dealt with through third-hand commentaries rather than first-hand accounts. For this reason, alpine journals remain extremely important to mountaineers.

The publishers of *Winter 8000*, Vertebrate Publishing, recently reported a decline in interest even for well-known British climbers' books. Perhaps the romance of mountaineering is dying. Perhaps it being replaced by what Voytek Kurtyka describes as 'the tyranny of numbers', where records of first, fastest, longest, furthest become more important than storytelling. McDonald suggests this as a possible trend in the passage quoted at the beginning of this review. It may be that the market will dictate that only books by television personalities, celebrities and environmentalists with mountain themes will be successful in the future. Old-fashioned mountaineering literature may seem just that, old-fashioned, requiring a passion and understanding of risk and adventure. Harsh mountaineering experiences are outside the comfort zones of urban modernity. I believe that without Bernadette McDonald's commentaries, many stories from other nations would not be heard in the English-speaking world.

My criticisms of the book are these: it could do with maps or diagrams for each of the mountains showing the routes climbed to help distinguish between difficult climbs, first ascents and the *voie normales*. And a full list of all winter expeditions in an appendix would be fascinating for those wanting a complete record of success and failures, and the reasons for those failures.

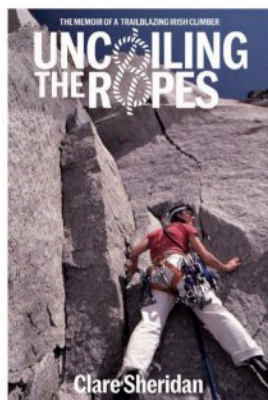
The first winter ascent of K2 by the Nepalis earlier this year came too late to make the pages of this book. Despite the controversy surrounding this ascent, it was and will remain a remarkable ascent for many reasons.

It certainly put the skills and fortitude of Nepali climbers on show for the whole world. Yet it also reminded me of a point Reinhold Messner made a few years ago when he asked, 'when tourism reaches the summit of Everest, what hope for true alpinism?' The late Doug Scott had a chance meeting with Nims in Kathmandu a few years ago. He told him: 'I've heard of you. You're obviously a great climber, but when are you going to do something new?' Is a winter ascent of K2 by the Abruzzi something new?

We must accept and do our best to understand different viewpoints even if we do not agree. Climbers in different countries are at different stages of development of their climbers' psyches. I'll let Bernadette McDonald have the final word:

Their stories are neither perfect nor complete. There are unanswered questions, bad decisions, unnecessary risks and broken bonds. There are tales of loyalty and bravery, ambition, commitment and vision. There are friendships wrought under such harsh conditions they can never be destroyed. These imperfect tales are all that we have and, in sharing them, we can try to understand the souls of the Ice Warriors, those men and women who find the greatest fulfilment in the highest mountains in the coldest, shortest, darkest days: the cruel days of winter.

John Porter



Uncoiling the Ropes

The Memoir of a Trailblazing Irish Climber
Clare Sheridan

Mweelrea Press, 2020, pp208, £18

The marriage at the heart of this outstanding memoir epitomises the loving and joyful coming together of a divided Ireland. Its author Clare Sheridan enjoyed a sheltered and religious upbringing in the Republic and the kindred climbing spirit she met in Chamonix and built her adult life with was a Northern Irishman who'd served in the British army and who liked to joke on drives from Dublin to Fairhead that they would soon leave 'the grey skies of the Irish Republic

for the blue skies of a Free Ulster!

The border they crossed back and forth then is now, in the grindingly inevitable consequences of our pig-headed politics in Westminster, a tinder-dry horizon over which there lies a not-so distant threat of a return to the days when Sheridan, hurrying on Friday nights from Dublin to Belfast, would step off the train to a 'chaos of sirens and diversions ... it seemed that bombs were going off all over the place ... Sometimes the blast and flash were just a street away as we drove north out of the city towards the silence and darkness of Fairhead.' As I write this there's news of some angry young men petrol bombing a bus on the Shankill Road and leaving it as burned out

as the promise famously made on the side of another bus during the 2016 referendum campaign.

The long history of British involvement in and impact on the island of Ireland seems written in the landscape of Sheridan's childhood. Family hill walks traversed settings like Gougane Barra, an old hideout for rebels in conflict with the English crown where, as her father leads them down an intimidating ravine, they find themselves at a spot where on a dark night in 1921 IRA guerrilla leader Tom Barry and his flying column daringly evaded British troops. From the Beara Peninsula, where in 1602 an Elizabethan army defeated the Gaelic chief Donal O'Sullivan Beare, they look out across Bantry Bay where in 1796 a French fleet coming to the aid of the United Irishmen was thwarted by storms and the Royal Navy. The book sings with beautiful Irish place and mountain names: Coomhola, Borlin Valley, Knockboy, Glengarriff. Music to the reader's ears.

When she turns 16, Sheridan and her sister Bairbre set out on an impressively independent all-Ireland bicycle tour. Pedalling into Ulster, amid the red post and telephone boxes, the English place-names on the signposts had a 'flat and one-dimensional' look. Their school history and geography had told them the real names as they would expect to read them: Doire, Tír Eoghan, Fir Manach. (The same British appropriation of Irish toponyms is the backbone of Brian Friel's landmark 1980 play *Translations*.) Years later it turns out her soulmate Calvin Torrans had made the equivalent pilgrimage in the other direction at the even younger age of 13, and solo.

Sheridan writes very frankly about religion and the social conditions prevailing in Ireland because of it. A youthful faith that burgeons into a truly felt vocation as a nun gives way to Sartre and Marx and daring talk of atheism during teacher training at University College Dublin. Besides, at Dalkey Quarry and over in Glendalough and elsewhere there's a new religion rearing up in her life: climbing. But the old religion doesn't leave the stage and later in life when she's moved in with Torrans in Bray but neglected to marry him there's a chilling scene as a Franciscan pays an insistently nosy visit to their new home. An attempt to fob him off is briefly resisted by his sandaled foot jamming the threshold as she tries to close the door. As a teacher in a highly conservative National Schools culture the possible consequences of exposure for living in sin were chilling. Earlier, in 1972, her sister, also bitten by the climbing bug, is running the UCD Mountaineering Club stand at freshers' week when another officious cleric confronts her for putting her God-given body at risk through mountaineering. Sadly it's only after he's gone that, with classic *esprit de l'escalier*, Bairbre thinks of answering, 'What about that pope, Pope Pius XI? He climbed Mont Blanc and the Matterhorn!'

The greatest obstacle though between Sheridan and her mountains is not God but man. She is forgiving and subtle but forthright in her account of the undermining misogyny she experienced in the predominantly male climbing community. 'Girls don't climb,' she's told, just as she makes the step up from hillwalking as a very young woman. The magazines only feature

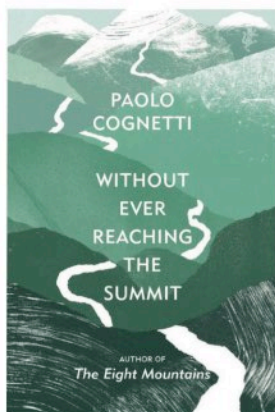
women as absurdly sexualised objects in the ad pages and the guidebooks are full of route names with amusing double entendres alluding to damp cracks and so on. 'I didn't find them a bit amusing,' she tells us, simply. Even her true love Torrans is comfortable repeating an axiom he's learnt in the army: 'Women weaken legs.'

There's an extraordinary chapter about her all too short closeness with Alison Hargreaves ('all bouncing curls and spiky ambition') who comes to stay with them in Bray for an Irish lecture she gives in February 1995. By that August Hargreaves has lost her life descending from the summit of K2 and disapproving newspaper columnists (notably female, Sheridan observes) are condemning this young mother who 'acted like a man' for her 'reality-denying self-centredness'. Sheridan, who by 1995 was a mother of three boys herself, has this to say: 'She acted like a man? Yes. Because for too long the choice of being selfish like that has only been open to men.'

The thrilling accounts of her climbing are scattered with refreshingly honest references to the female experience of it, having to rule out having a pee when strangers climb too close, managing the onset of her period just as she commits to the Walker Spur, even having to consult about the pill being contraindicated at altitude before her first Himalayan expedition (no simple matter in the Ireland of the day). The intersection of motherhood and climbing has brought her both triumph and retreat. As Torrans' Himalayan career gathered speed she consciously took a back seat, watching from the sidelines as her purist husband got on the wrong side of elite Irish climbing politics and found himself uninvited from the siege-style expedition that put the first Irish climber on top of Everest. But closer to home a fair sharing of the childcare delivered opportunities that she converted into dazzling successes. For instance the Bonatti Pillar, now sadly for my generation a collapsed legend, which she'd dreamt of leading since the 1970s and succeeded on in 1996 (after tip-toeing past her children's tent before dawn and being stopped in her tracks by the youngest waking up to demand love and attention on her way to the life-and-death highpoint of her Alpine career). Satisfyingly, when she descended to the *Flammes de Pierre* bivy ledge afterwards, she was handed a strong, sweet coffee by a suitably impressed Ivano Ghirardini. And how many pregnant mums have done the Cuillin Ridge at 26 weeks? Sheridan is hard as nails.

She and Torrans will leave a colossal legacy in their development of Irish climbing and of Fairhead in particular, a famously serious venue completely beribboned with new routes they've put up over five decades. The book will convey to you the magic of the place and the commitment they've put into it. But above all I love it for its portrait of their Alpine endeavours in a now vanished Chamonix where you roughed it in Snell's Field, where the Bonatti Pillar still clung to the Dru and where you might spot Gaston Rébuffat on the *téléphérique*. To me, in this gripping but modestly told narrative full of dazzling achievements, Sheridan's most enviable boast is that 'for years my summer address was c/o Snell Sports, Chamonix.'

Nick Simons



Without Ever Reaching the Summit

Paolo Cognetti

Harvill Secker, 2020, pp 145, £10.99

This gentle little book pays homage to Peter Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard*. Paolo Cognetti, born in Milan in 1978, the year of publication of Matthiessen's classic, almost 40 years later followed in the American author's footsteps on a trek through inner Dolpo in northwest Nepal.

Matthiessen, an adherent of Zen Buddhism, famously didn't see a snow leopard. He wrote: 'Have you seen the snow leopard? No! Isn't that wonderful?' And in that non-seeing he is content. Cognetti echoes

that same non-attachment to goals in his *Without Ever Reaching the Summit* title.

He notes that Matthiessen had used a very specific word for his journey – *gnaskor*, (pronounced *nekor*; a pilgrim is a *nekor-wa*) or 'going around a place' – and contrasts this Tibetan idea of pilgrimage, where there is no point of arrival, with pilgrimages to Jerusalem, Rome or Mecca.

'Without a destination, how do we know if we have been purified?' Cognetti sees a connection between the need for a holy city at the end of a journey and the mountaineering 'obsession' with gaining a summit. 'Christians plant crosses at the tops of mountains, Buddhists circle around them,' he writes. 'I found violence in the first gesture, kindness in the second; a desire to conquer as opposed to embrace.'

Paolo Cognetti garnered literary prizes and massive sales with his loosely autobiographical novel *The Eight Mountains* set in the foothills of the Italian Alps. It's a story of deep friendship between a city boy and a child of the *alpeggio* who remains heaved to his mountain homeland even as traditional life there disintegrates. In this latest work Cognetti pretty well dismisses the idea of a mountain people still existing in the Alps: all are now 'citizens of the immense European megalopolis, or of its wooded periphery'. In the most popular areas of Nepal too, modernity was bringing its mixed blessings. How would it be in Dolpo?

The Eight Mountains had about it a captivating simplicity, redolent, perhaps, of its Alpine pasture setting. This quality, plus the fact that I too had followed Matthiessen's trail past Phoksundo lake to remote Shey gumpa and the Crystal Mountain (leading a trek for Mountain Kingdoms in 2011) had me looking forward to Cognetti's latest offering with keen anticipation.

Maybe I was expecting too much. *The Snow Leopard* is a work of hallucinogenic beauty, much more a spiritual journey than a quest for the world's most elusive big cat. Together with *The Tree Where Man Was Born* (1972) it was written when Matthiessen was at the height of his literary powers, at least as regards his non-fiction. Indeed he told the essayist and poet Mark Tredinnick in 2000 that he could no longer find the place where the lyric

prose of *The Snow Leopard* came from.

Cognetti, by contrast, has written an engaging travelogue, peppered with quotes from Matthiessen and thoughtful insights. In a sense he is trying to *be* Matthiessen, keeping a journal (but who doesn't?), drawing maps, seeing signs in natural occurrences, imagining one of the porters to be some kind of shaman watching over him. It's a Sealed Knot performance: the props are good and the location spot on, but it lacks the blood and guts of the original.

Few westerners had visited Dolpo before the 1970s. Matthiessen accompanied the naturalist George Schaller who wanted to study blue sheep in the region of Shey gumpa and the sacred Crystal Mountain that overlooks it, a place of pilgrimage for Buddhists. They and a small trail crew walked in all the way from Pokhara, crossing into Dolpo by way of the Jang La, west of Dhaulagiri, a trek of some 250 miles; they were away from Kathmandu for two and half months.

Inner Dolpo is often portrayed as a sort of sanctuary where the traditions of ancient Tibet live on, isolated from the cultural genocide perpetrated by China in Tibet itself. 'It had survived somehow thanks to history's forgetfulness,' writes Cognetti. Or so he was told. The reality is a good deal more nuanced. In Saldang, a settlement at 3900m and barely 20km from the border patrolled by China, he witnesses the timeless scene of women threshing barley with flails to a synced rhythm, but also satellite dishes and the litter of plastic packaging and cans of fake Red Bull. Sooner or later, Cognetti predicts, there will be a road direct to China, the Nagaon riverbed will be reduced to landfill, 'and the last vestiges of an ancient Tibetan culture will disappear amid garbage and cell phones.'

Cognetti does not see a snow leopard. Nor was he ever likely to. While Matthiessen spent two weeks at Shey, scouring the hills with his binoculars between bouts of meditation and deep introspection, Cognetti camped by the gumpa for just two nights. He and two friends had joined a commercial trek along with seven other Europeans: in all a caravan of 25 mules and 22 men. Cognetti shades his fellow trekkers very much into the background, an intrusion, perhaps, into his reverie.

What is lacking in *Without Ever Reaching the Summit* is any serious analysis of Matthiessen as a writer, his character or *The Snow Leopard's* abiding popularity. The *Leopard* is anything but an easy read if the many pages of spiritual self-interrogation are to be wholly understood, and certainly no Nepal primer for the 21st century visitor. Richard Mabey, in an introduction to a 2010 edition of *The Snow Leopard* confessed himself 'in need of some spiritual porters' as he tried to comprehend Matthiessen's reflections on Zen and the infinite. 'I understand the words, though not always their meaning,' wrote Mabey. 'I admire their implicit morality.'

Cognetti regrets he stumbled upon *The Snow Leopard* a little too late to know its author. Matthiessen had died in 2014, aged almost 90. Mark Tredinnick was more fortunate. In 2000 he visited Matthiessen at his home on Long Island and together they took a walk along the shoreline, discussing his work and 'nature writing' in general: a label Matthiessen abhorred but,

given his eloquent advocacy for wildness and the dignity of all beings, one he could hardly shake off.

The 47 pages devoted to Matthiessen in Tredinnick's *The Land's Wild Music* – 'a roving study of the literature of place' – will tell you much more about the mind and literary artistry of the author of *The Snow Leopard* than Cognetti seemingly comprehends, though less about the route and contemporary Dolpo.

Although *The Snow Leopard* is Matthiessen's best known work, in the depth of its personal introspection and spiritual complexity it is somewhat atypical in an output of more than 30 novels and non-fiction, apart from his Zen journals (1969-82) published under the title *Nine-Headed Dragon River* in 1978. (In the preface, Matthiessen, with self-deprecating humour, warns the 'unwary reader' that this Zen book was composed against the best instincts of its author, 'who has no business writing upon a subject so incompletely understood.')

Matthiessen undertook his journey to Shey in a mood of prolonged anguish following the death, a year and half earlier, of his wife Deborah Love at the age of 44. He points out her grave to Tredinnick during their shoreline walk, doing so 'without fuss or sentiment'. Setting the background in *The Snow Leopard*, Matthiessen writes of an earlier trip to Nepal in 1961 and the buying of a small bronze in the Asan bazaar as a gift for his new wife. He continues:

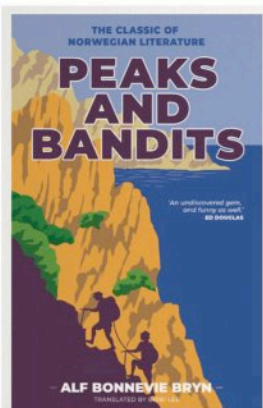
'My wife and I were to become students of Zen Buddhism, and the green bronze Buddha from Kathmandu was the one I chose for a small altar in Deborah's room in the New York hospital where she died last year, in the winter.'

This quiet sentence lets us peer for a moment into Matthiessen's deep well of grief, writes Tredinnick:

... in the winter'. The first time I read that phrase, with the comma that precedes it like a sob – I wept.

Without Ever Reaching the Summit will not have you reaching for the tissues. Cognetti does not have the penetrative depth of Tredinnick or the ringing prose mastery of Matthiessen. However, if this modest offering draws you to a re-reading of the source of its inspiration or an exploration of Matthiessen's wider literary territory it will have performed a rewarding service.

Stephen Goodwin



Peaks and Bandits

Alf Bonnevie Bryn

Translated from Norwegian by Bibi Lee

Vertebrate Publishing, 2021, pp128, £16

Norwegians are not renowned for an overwhelming sense of humour. A country that divides between winter darkness, heavy rain and 24-hour summer sunshine, with a population roughly one-third that of Greater London sprinkled across an empty but spectacular landscape and 13,000 miles of coastline resembling a page ripped from an atlas, Norway has much to feel serious about. Being the richest nation per capita on earth, thanks to North Sea oil, proba-

bly lifts spirits but the best joke skilfully delivered may be met by a nod and a smile or a mere rumbling guffaw.

Welcome then a book that might brighten any dull day, possibly the first humorous Norwegian story to be translated into English. *Peaks and Bandits* by the Norwegian climber and author of detective novels Alf Bonnevie Bryn tells the story of an expedition to Corsica by Bryn and George Ingle Finch, the Australian mountaineer who became famous for his part in the 1922 Everest expedition. Finch designed oxygen equipment that enabled him to be among the first climbers ever to reach 28,000ft.

Peaks and Bandits became an admired classic of Norwegian literature for its eccentric verve. It describes how in 1909 the two mountaineers determined to sharpen their hopes of a Himalayan expedition with a climbing holiday in Corsica. En route they paused at Pisa where, whilst the guardians were at lunch, Finch, armed with his ice axe, attempted the less steep north face of the famous leaning tower. He reached the fifth floor before the guardians reappeared and ordered him to stop. He addressed them from a pocket phrase book: 'This is my first time in Italy,' he declared. 'I am travelling for my health.' When he did retreat he was accused of avoiding the entry fee and charged one lire, as if he was just an ordinary visitor, thus avoiding compromising paperwork.

Finch had a life-long addiction for climbing man-made structures; unable to resist any challenging facade he might possibly swarm up. Among many first ascents he counted the south-east corner of the white ballroom behind the palm gardens of Oslo's Grand Hotel which he climbed, though a professor of organic chemistry, having just delivered a lecture to the Norwegian Alpine Club about the first Mount Everest expedition. He was also expert on how to deal with snakes, having grown up on an Australian sheep farm. Confronted by a yard-long Corsican snake George regarded the reptile with almost sentimental interest. He approached close, grabbed it by the neck and in a fraction, removed two fangs from its upper jaw with a penknife. 'He belongs to us now and shall be our mascot,' George declared. They agreed to call the snake James and it remained with them for the rest of the holiday,

an accessory in numerous practical jokes.

The bandits of the title came from the original Corsican *bandito*, meaning someone who had been banned or excommunicated; sharply distinct from someone classed as a *brigante* or robber. Bandito suggested lesser crimes and allowed a more comfortable place in Corsican society although certain family names nevertheless continued to reflect old levels of suspicion and some became famous enough 'to receive visits from tourists'.

The holiday happened in 1909, although the book did not appear until 1943. It is more a reflection of life on the island and its history at the turn of the century than an instruction of how to climb Capo al Dente, the Cinque Frati or any of the summits they attempted. There was little evidence that Corsica was crowded with climbers at the time. 'The difficulties concerning the ascent were first and foremost that we were too lazy to get up early enough in the morning,' Bryn confessed. On the Capo al Dente, where the group spent time on the summit sunning themselves, they left a pipe case with notes about their ascent. Bryn said the case was returned 16 years later after the summit had been climbed, possibly for a second time. An extraordinary account, that gives glimpses of a wider history and a few amusing moments.

Ronald Faux



Rock 'n' Roll on the Wall

Silvo Karo

Translated from Slovenian by Gorazd Pipenbaher

Silvo Karo, 2020, pp304, £26

In the first paragraph of his introduction, Silvo Karo declares himself not much of a writer, admitting that, when prodded by friends, he had wondered, 'What would I write about?'

Two hundred pages later, Karo leads us through overhanging rock high in the Himalaya that has the quality of a ploughed field. He refrains from superlatives. The situation itself is enough: his and Janez Jeglič's mind-bending alpine-style ascent of Bhagarathi III in 1990. 'Such things happen, you live through them if you're lucky, and then you keep your mouth shut,' he adds by way of emotion. Yes, of course. Fortunately, Karo doesn't keep his mouth entirely shut. And he has plenty to say.

Silvo Karo was born and raised in communist Yugoslavia, and worked on his family's farm from the day he could stand. Hard work forged him, and in describing his pre-climbing years he reflects upon working high on a church roof, untethered of course (free soloing for Jesus), and the joy of carrying large objects on swaying scaffolding, which helped hone his sense of balance. Which, naturally, led to games like finding harder way ways to 'play' on the high roofs while carrying planks of wood. Hey, we all find our

fun. But then he casually mentions, as if it were an afterthought, that by the end of elementary school he'd started thinking of other occupations. *Wait*. That last scene was at elementary school?

As he progressed to working in factories, he made the most of it: 'Work or fun, the salary was always the same.' Something in that mindset predisposes everything. And when you're carrying around an invisible key, it's only a short step to finding the lock it fits. Once he discovered climbing, his drive, that irresistible force, led him and his partners from the scrappy climbs of the Julian Alps to some of the greatest alpine ascents in history. 'We were like dogs picking bones,' he writes. They had so little, and did so much; he recalls an early outing with his mentor, the great Franček Knez, a laconic man with an abiding love of mountains, and being astounded that Knez didn't lock the door to his apartment. 'He claimed that he had nothing worth stealing.'

Some of the most fascinating passages in Karo's book come not from the climbing – which is, in the truest sense of the word, awesome (and harrowing, incomprehensible, and superlative depleting) – but in his reflections on growing up, the time of change, the era and the culture in which he lived and learned, one often between two worlds, east and west. When Slovenia gained independence, there was much to celebrate. But is anything ever all good or all bad? 'The sense of collective identity was disappearing and being replaced by individualism. Egos started taking over and everyone kept to their own piece of land, so they wouldn't have to share their crops with anyone else.'

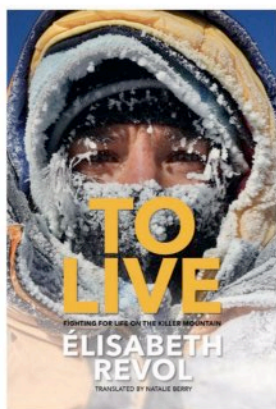
Karo's writing is straightforward: no theatrics and no forced drama. Boring? Hardly. His ascents and the seemingly endless, horrific storms through which he climbed need no fluffing. The closest he comes to self-celebration might be after his and Jeglic's legendary climb of Cerro Torre's south face in 1988, where he writes, 'I brought a large bottle of wine back to base camp, and in the evening we drank to our suffering and perseverance.' If you're looking to read someone's therapy session, this probably isn't your book. Thank god. But don't think of it as unreflective, either. Karo seems a hard man with a soft heart, and in the raw style of his writing, we come to know his uncomplicated nature.

At times Karo describes the immaculate landscapes with a level of feeling and eloquence that betrays his opening declaration, even if the writing gets slightly rough in spots, occasionally slipping into non sequiturs or with characters emerging without any introduction. But such examples are minor, and hardly diminished my enjoyment of the book. If you have even a shred of appreciation for the magnitude of his ascents, and for the historical significance of Slovenian alpinism – of which Karo played a major role – then his unpretentious storytelling might give something even greater: the space to ponder what it was like.

And yet for all the praise of Karo's climbs, and his ability to endure – the suffering and perseverance – even more impressive is his evolution. Karo never stayed static, avoiding the sad spiral of many climbers as the game

passes them by. Rather, Karo's attitude led him to embrace the changing times, from nationalistic sieges to stealthy alpine-style ascents, always taking the best of his inherent athletic competitiveness and his mindset, blending skills learned from sport, aid and speed climbing, then applying them to new objectives with fresh eyes. If there is a formula to becoming our own versions of Silvo Karo, perhaps that is it: embrace positive change, discard the bullshit and keep going. Simple. Complicated. Life. Sure, this is a climber's book, giving us a glimpse into the workings of an icon, but it's also something more. While few of us can even begin to approach Karo's accomplishments, most could do worse than to emulate his outlook.

Kelly Cordes



To Live

Fighting for Life on the Killer Mountain
Élisabeth Revol

Translated from French by Natalie Berry
Vertebrate Publishing, 2020, 154pp, £24

'The summit of Everest!' writes Élisabeth Revol at the start of her book about her ascent of Nanga Parbat (8125m) in 2018 with climbing partner Tomasz 'Tomek' Mackiewicz. Somewhat bemusing, but it soon becomes clear that this achievement, followed the next day by success on Lhotse, was the 'ray of light' that brought her back to life a year after the tragedy of the 2018 expedition in the course of

which Mackiewicz died.

Nanga was his obsession: this was his seventh attempt at climbing the mountain in winter, Revol's fourth and their third together. On 28 January 2018 they left camp four at 7,300m and set off for the summit in pure alpine style, carrying the absolute minimum, intending to return the same day. They reached the summit late, at about 6.30pm, but as Mackiewicz had not worn his snow goggles during the climb he was rendered blind. What should have been a profound celebration – theirs was the second winter ascent of Nanga Parbat and the first by a woman – was now a life-threatening situation and Revol was faced with the enormous challenge of trying to get her sightless climbing partner down the mountain.

She drew on her many years of mountaineering experience and her unswerving determination to guide him but after descending for 900m he could no longer walk and blood was pouring from his mouth. Her immediate priority was to find shelter but the position of their last camp eluded her and a crevasse provided the only protection from strong, sub-zero winds. Tomek's comfort and safety were her priorities as she waited for the rescue which her friend Ludovic was attempting to co-ordinate from his base in France. As the long and punishingly cold night dragged its feet across the mountain Revol realised that she would have to respond to Ludovic's urging



Élisabeth Revol and Tomasz Mackiewicz on Nanga Parbat.

and try to get to a lower altitude, since a helicopter rescue of two people at 7,380m was not possible and Tomek could no longer move.

What follows is both tender and pragmatic: she anchors Tomek as safely as she can inside the crevasse, using the ice axes which were vital for her retreat down the mountain but feeling that they were better employed in keeping him safe. In addition, she leaves all her extra equipment to provide him with as much warmth as possible. Alone, equipped only with a pole and desperate to get help for him, she begins to descend the mountain. The photographs and topos included in the book give the reader some idea of the enormity of the challenge awaiting her, in particular the 'varnished wall' of the *Kinshofer* route for which she has no tools.

Facing another night in the open in extreme cold and having been without food or water for two nights and three days she knows she must find shelter or die. Her description of a second night in a crevasse plunges the reader into her world of sleep-deprived hallucination where she is offered hot tea in exchange for her boots, one of which she finds she has taken off and has to recover from the depths beneath her, too late to prevent her foot succumbing to severe frostbite.

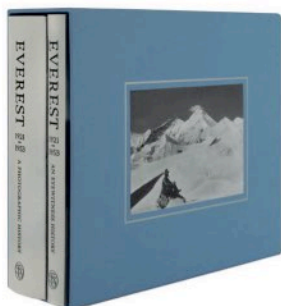
The narrative combines courage and enormous resilience with the raw emotion of leaving Tomek alone. 'Guilt overwhelms me, drowns me.' The urgency and apparent hopelessness of her situation and her impassioned internal dialogue drive the reader inexorably forward. Revol takes command of the situation, focusing on staying alive in order to get help for Tomek. 'I no longer want to be that small vessel in the immensity of the ocean, tossed about by the waves and the wind, without a rudder, unable to control anything. I take over the helm.' She was in a race against time, exacerbated by a storm system approaching the mountain.

The arrival of elite mountaineers Denis Urubko and Adam Bielecki is signalled by ‘the ballet of light beams’ that Revol sees in the darkness at 5,950m. On being told of the desperate situation on Nanga Parbat they had selflessly abandoned their attempt to climb K2 and were flown by helicopter with Piotr Tomala and Jaroslaw Botor to base camp. Revol was saved but it was impossible to rescue Tomek. Physically and mentally vulnerable, she was unaware of the next ordeal she had to face: the media onslaught in Islamabad. ‘What I had experienced on the mountain was nothing compared to the violence of my return.’

The extremes of press coverage painted her both as heroine and betrayer and attracted comment and judgement both positive and negative not just from the mountaineering community but from those who could have had no conception of what she had achieved and endured: ‘Who knows the exact circumstances? Who was there?’

In the aftermath of this furore she found herself questioning her own unceasing desire for altitude, escape: the simplicity of life and focus she describes as her addiction. It illuminates her life but also drives her to seek out harder challenges and greater performance, often at the cost of other relationships. Her ascent of Everest was recuperative. It brought her back full circle to her childhood dream of climbing the mountain whose poster decorated her bedroom wall; to a realisation that to live fully is to be in the environment she loves but not to be its prisoner.

Val Johnson



Everest

From Reconnaissance to Summit, 1921 to 1953

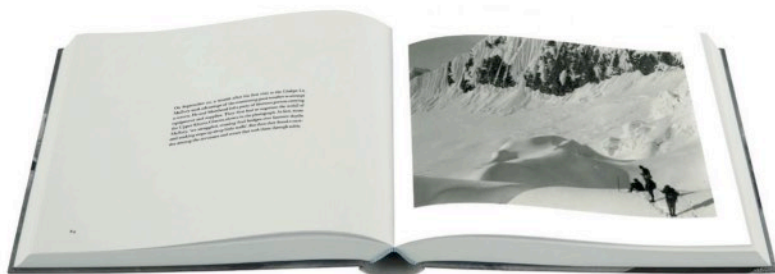
Edited by Peter Gillman

Folio Society, 2021, boxed, vol 1 pp536, vol 2 pp208, £199

The centenary of the first Everest expeditions is upon us, unleashing, like a small avalanche, a number of projects, exhibitions, films, retrospectives, books and media extravaganzas, not least the Alpine Club's own exhibition and catalogue launched as this review was being written. With

the obvious exception of the latter, how much of this will change or even refresh what we know about this eye-catching moment is open to question. So much of our understanding is captured in the fleeting glimpse Noel Odell had of George Mallory and Sandy Irvine being swallowed by the summit mists. Did they or didn't they? We do love a good mystery.

Yet while that is an understandably compelling moment, it tends, like the clouds that covered our intrepid heroes, to obscure a broader and no less human story, one that is considerably deeper too, and remains to be uncovered. If you thought there was nothing left to say, think again. That realisation dawned on me looking through this astonishing compendium, expertly



With 268 images, the Folio Society's collection is the most extensive visual record of the early Everest expeditions yet published.

edited by Peter Gillman, in two volumes, of photographs and writings from the more significant Everest expeditions between 1921 and 1953. While a collector's item, given the price, it is a magisterial undertaking, exhaustive but not exhausting, spreading, as it were, many more cards on the table and in doing so adding fresh perspectives.

Let me give you just one example from the 268 spellbinding photographs on offer. On page 51 of the album is an image familiar to me, of a head lama and a group of monks at a monastery. (As it happens, I have a copy on my wall at home.) I've sometimes glanced at this and assumed it was taken at Rongbuk, since that's the monastery most often in our minds when we think of the north side of Everest. But of course it isn't, it was taken at a monastery miles away in the Kharta valley on the day Charles Howard-Bury and Sandy Wollaston visited. Howard-Bury reports on the warm welcome they received and gives the name of the monastery as Ganden-chhöffel. Ganden, the first of the three major Geluk-school monasteries in the Lhasa area, was founded in 1409 by the great reformer Tsongkhapa. The first abbot of Ganden also founded Tashilhunpo at Shigatse, to which this little outlier was attached. 'Chhöffel', these days written Chophel or sometimes Choephel, means something like 'spreader of the dharma'.

The abbot told Howard-Bury the monastery was around 500 years old and was founded by a saint called Jetsun Ngawang Choephel. Jetsun means 'reverend' and Ngawang Choephel is a common enough name; I know nothing about this one. The abbot also told his visitors a story about the monastery's foundation, which happened after a great, sudden flood, a feature of Himalayan life long before climate change. A frog was taken and buried under the temple's central pillar. Annoyingly, there had been subsequent floods. Howard-Bury then has a glance round the monastery, speaks of Tibetan antipathy towards Indians (not strictly true) and then mentions that he took the photograph now on my wall.

It's a slight encounter but the history behind it is rich and in a strange way adds a fresh perspective on the strange world of climbing mountains. The frog is the giveaway. As an animal it transforms itself, a useful teaching aid

for Buddhists. The frog also appears in legend as a source of (witch-inspired) leprosy, a disease a famous 11th century female saint called Machig Zhama suffered from. Her father suggested she use her magical powers to drain the lake in the Kharta valley, allowing it to be settled and her to be cured. It didn't work. (The cure came later through methods that can only be described as 'for the broad-minded'.)

Machig Zhama was a *dakini*, a shifting, playful category of feminine divinity. The Tibetan word is *khandro*, meaning 'space dancer'. Many climbers will appreciate the appeal of space dancing: literally, psychologically, culturally and politically. In Machig Zhama's day, long before the Geluk school and the first of the Dalai Lamas, the tantric practice of *chöd* was transforming Buddhism in Tibet. Among the many translations of this mind-bending term is 'crazy wisdom'. Once again, climbers may empathise. The Everest climbers, judging from this wonderful collection, sometimes have the look of a cricket team invited to play out of season. But you sense from the space in these photographs that Everest changed them irrevocably.

In Machig Zhama's time, more than 900 years before George Mallory, the wider Everest region was known as Latö Lho, or south Latö. It was known as the interface between powerfully different cultures that shared a common spiritual practice. It was in spaces like this, the world's margins if you like, that the most interesting stuff happened. It's no coincidence that other favourite arenas for the more extreme practice of *chöd* were charnel grounds and cemeteries.

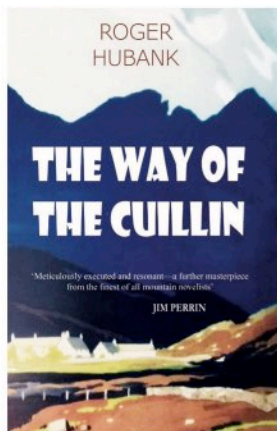
Forgive the diversion but one of the great strengths of such a large selection is that the indigenous societies and workforce these expeditions relied on, without which they would have achieved very little, are given a lot more space to be seen than is usually allowed. And that gives us so much more to consider in reviewing these landmark expeditions. Far from being a blank on the map, we can see in the Tibetan and Sherpa faces that Latö Lho was known and precious ground. It's no coincidence that the *beyul* of Tibet, the sacred valleys revealed in visions, are threaded through such high mountain regions. In that sense they hold the same appeal for ordinary Tibetans as they do for us, except their goal is more often spiritual practice than summits.

The other 267 images in this book were no less of a pleasure for me. The greatest tour de force is the foldout panorama made from images seamlessly brought together and taken by Howard-Bury from the Lhakpa La. It is a magnificent view of Everest that includes a plate camera in the foreground, a reminder of how the 1921 pushed photographic limits and to elegant effect. I adored Frank Smythe's shot of Jack Longland having his haircut. And the photo he took from his tent at 27,400ft, past his feet and the pack frame of one of the porters. In artistic terms a dud, but it speaks eloquently of bitter cold and extreme suffering; what a Buddhist might call austerities. Smythe took another of my favourites, a group of Tibetan children and an old man, known as Father William to the climbers, sitting around a gramophone in the village of Kharta Shika. Alf Gregory's work is also shown to

great effect and it's instructive to compare both their styles and the worlds they were photographing. I came away sensing that the 1930s expeditions were more closely linked to 1953 than they were to the pioneers of the 1920s and why that might be.

Alongside the album, with its 268 images each carefully captioned by Gillman, is another 208pp volume of excerpts from the Everest climbers themselves, telling the story, with a short preface from Jan Morris and an introductory essay from Wade Davis setting it all in its historical context. There are two expertly drawn maps, although they include the international border that wasn't agreed until the 1960s. Like I said, Everest is more a space than a frontier. I was pleased to see the inclusion of Charles Bruce's encounter with Dzatrul Rinpoche, head lama at Rongbuk monastery, and of the Rinpoche's own view of the 1922 disaster in which seven porters died. Dzatrul Rinpoche was the great, evangelising Nyingma-tradition guru who founded nine new monasteries, including that at Tengpoche on the south side of Everest, re-establishing a tradition in the area dating back a thousand years just as the world discovered these hidden places for the first time.

Ed Douglas



The Way of the Cuillin

Roger Hubank

Rymour Books, 2021, 234pp, £10

In his latest novel, Roger Hubank takes us to Skye. His first novel, *Hazard's Way*, which won the Boardman Tasker prize and the Grand Prix at Banff in 2001, was located in the Lakes. Subsequent locations include the Alps (*North Wall*), the major peaks (*Evening Light*) and the Peak District (*Taking Leave*). All his novels thus weave their personal narratives with a background that becomes more than a location but a character in itself – and in *The Way of the Cuillin* I found that character to be the most powerful and affecting of all.

As with *Hazard's Way*, Hubank has selected a telling moment of recent history. *Hazard's Way* took place on the eve of the First World War. Now we intersect with the Spanish civil war and the Sudeten crisis of 1938 that led to the illusory peace of Munich and presaged the Second World War. Appearing before us are the three generations of the Marlowe family, who include an archdeacon and a Conservative MP. They gather at Glen Brittle, intending to commemorate a route first climbed by Stephen Marlowe, the family patriarch. There are generational clashes and political disputes. Family tensions emerge, revelations are made, long-festered secrets surface.

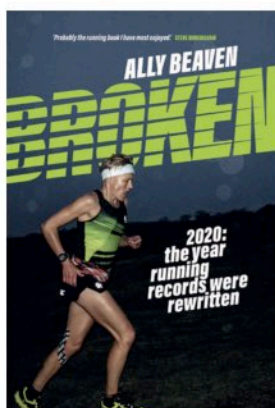
The cast of characters is Hubank's longest, so much so that he has helpfully listed the most important 24 opposite the opening page, adding:

'Sundry others include mountaineers, fishermen, an innkeeper, an airline pilot and a passenger.' *Alpine Journal* readers are likely to delight in the cameo parts awarded to celebrated mountaineers. One is Norman Collie, 'a white-haired old man sitting by the window' at the Sligachan Inn, gazing out towards the Cuillin, a description that invokes a scene in the *The Last Enemy* by Richard Hillary. We also encounter Bill Murray, glimpsed at the bar on the same occasion.

Hubank takes us from the House of Commons to the battlefields of Spain, with further scenes set in artists' haunts in Fitzrovia and flashbacks to the Western Front. But always he draws us back to the Cuillin, sometimes for a respite from the personal and historical struggles that are being enacted; sometimes as a threatening accompaniment to conflicts that leave you wondering how they are to be resolved. Hubank delights in the adhesive gabbro, the sweeping scree, the striated clouds hanging over the corries, the rushing burns, the fairy pools, the enchanted places.

Each time he took us there I succumbed to pangs of nostalgia for the Cuillin, recalling magical days of struggle and reward, of solitude and friendship that I suspect are beyond me now. The denouement leaves you both stunned and reflective, wondering whether Hubank is telling us it was inevitable or avoidable, a question that haunts you as much as the scenery where it played out. This is an ambitious novel, audacious in its scope, delicate in the path it weaves through its complex relationships, enticing as it lures you on to its end. Its success in realising its ambitions provokes one further question: where will Hubank take us next?

Peter Gillman



Broken

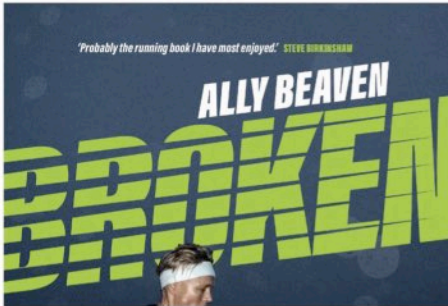
2020: The Year Running Records Were Broken
Ally Beaven

Vertebrate Publishing, 2020, pp150, £13

I'm not a fell runner. But I've rubbed shoulders with fell runners, among them the best of their day: friends such as A A Robertson, John Disley, Eric Beard and Joss Naylor. I've photographed them in action and I have the greatest respect for them for I've always enjoyed moving fast over the hills myself, though perhaps not quite so fast. But this book is not about mere fell running; it's about adventure running – indeed ultra running.

To be an ultra runner on the same wavelength as the denizens of this book, you must first be a mountaineer, a competent navigator and an imaginative yet meticulous planner. And you'll need to inhabit the right kind of body, which you'll endeavour to keep super-fit. A high pain-threshold is axiomatic.

Every year a series of international ultra-running events takes place,



Not only broken, but wet too.
Sub-optimal weather in the Lake
District on the Bob Graham Round.
(Steve Ashworth)

of which the best known are the Saharan Marathon des Sables and the Ultra-Trail du Mont Blanc. At the domestic level are dozens of testing annual events such as the Welsh 1,000m Peaks Race, the Ben Nevis

Race, and the OMM (originally the two-day Karrimor Mountain Marathon), which besides considerable fell-running prowess demands a high level of orienteering skill.

Many of the characters featured in this book however, while often competing in such events, seem to get more satisfaction from competing, personally, against themselves. This I can understand, for I suspect that most mountaineers find great satisfaction in pushing the boat out further than usual over rugged and unfamiliar mountain country, not to beat anyone else but just to see if it can be done. We fondly remember that 'one more summit', that 20-hour day, that bivouac long after dark, exhausted but at peace with our ego.

The advent of Covid-19 in the spring of 2020 caused the cancellation of the season's competitive fell and ultra-running events, but for some of the best runners in Britain, men and women, it provided an opportunity to plot, plan and train for more interesting personal projects. Typically these involved what are dubbed FKTs: fastest known times.

FKTs are a logical American innovation giving runners an opportunity to race the clock in places where an actual race is not possible. There are FKTs for most if not all existing routes and records. Otherwise you select, or dream up a route of your own, time yourself and record it on the international FKT website. And then someone comes along and does it faster and amends the website. Random examples of domestic FKTs include, at the time of writing, local jollies such as the Colchester Orbital at 2h 18m 47s and the Basingstoke Canal Towpath Trail at 7h 45m 1s to the rather more serious Cuillin Ridge at 3h 14m 58s and the gruelling Pennine Way at 2d 10h 4m 53s.

Of course other appropriate details are recorded such as distance, altitude gain and so forth, besides certain verification requirements. But one has only to enter FKT on Google and take it from there. There are some records however for which the FKT website is not appropriate, for instance Lakeland's Bob Graham Round or the 24-Hour Munro Record.

For those involved the style of any expedition is important. The ideal is: person goes for run in the hills. An informal, enjoyable day out with perhaps one mate, and which happens, surprise, surprise, to establish a new FKT. However a major multi-day run, a serious attempt to smash a celebrated

record for such as the Continuous Complete Munros, is likely to involve months of planning, a dedicated support team to navigate and carry the essential energy-bars and emergency gear, and then a campervan, a cook and a bicycle or two.

Last year, thanks to the pandemic, saw an explosion of records broken and new FKTs established by elite runners, both male and female. This book recounts the stories of several of the most challenging.

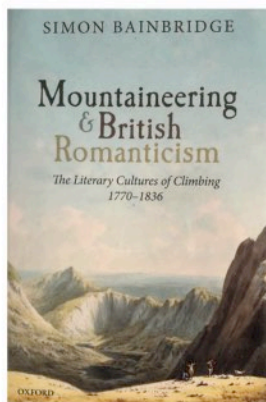
Of the 13 chapters, one recounts how in July local runner Ian Stewart established a new FKT for what his wife Laura dubbed the Cairngorm Parkrun, one continuous expedition on foot linking all 58 Munros in the Cairngorm National Park. He started on Mount Keen and reached his Cairngorm summit finish at 2am some five days and 22 hours later, having covered 261 miles, climbed almost 67,260ft and sleeping for just 31 hours, mostly as short naps. Although paced on occasion by 'visiting' friends, it was an impressive accomplishment by any reckoning but one of many such in this book.

The Dartmoor Round chapter is intriguing because the relevant FKT was broken several times during the summer of 2020. The route covers 28 tors, 13,000 feet of ascent over some 75 miles and includes much bog and a hazardous crossing of the River Tavy. During July several runners clocked plus or minus 16 and a half hours, but controversy ensued: was the finish on the summit of Sheepstor or the bar of the nearby Royal Oak Inn?

Other chapters cover further prodigious feats, including the RAF officer who in 1980 had run the Three Peaks, linking them by bicycle, in just under two days and who now in 2020, at the age of 73, repeated the trip in a trifle over twice that time. The Land's End to John O'Groats record is well covered. Apparently it's known to runners as the LEJOG and has been done in just over nine days. Elsewhere it's explained that to complete the Munros correctly one must kayak or swim the crossing to Mull.

Ally Beaven, a well-travelled Orcadian, is part of this scene. When not running, either with an FKT objective of his own or in the support team of a mate with an FKT objective, he can be found running the bar at Glenmore Lodge, the Scottish National Mountain Training Centre in the Cairngorms. He writes well and light-heartedly, spelling out the enjoyable agonies that his subjects endure, and which those of us who have an inkling of what is involved can appreciate. Nevertheless, a glossary explaining the parameters of, say, the Bob Graham or the Charlie Ramsay Round would have been useful, while a brief FKT table of the routes described would not go amiss. This must surely be an inspirational book for both aficionados and those interested in the power of mind over matter, but I wonder what Mr Naismith would make of it all?

John Cleare



Mountaineering and British Romanticism

The Literary Cultures of Climbing 1770-1836

Simon Bainbridge

Oxford University Press, 2020, pp300, £60

'Mountaineering' as a leisure activity was first named by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1802 and 'cragman' as a recreational rock climber used by Sir Walter Scott in his 1829 novel *Anne of Geierstein*, as opposed to the 'craigsman' sea fowler in his novel *The Antiquary* (1816). Simon Bainbridge's argument, from his careful discussion of the evidence in this book, is that 'it was during the Romantic period, rather than in the Victorian period, that mountaineering was established as a leisure pursuit in Britain.' Not only is the evidence embedded in a wide range of literature of the period beyond the well-known poetic examples, but diaries, letters, journals, journalism, 'tour' books and guide-books reveal 'processes in which gender and indeed class identities were challenged and negotiated, questioned and qualified.' It is Bainbridge's alertness to these distinctions, in a carefully structured book that makes such fascinating and often surprising reading.

Because the origins of British mountaineering have been thought to be Alpine and Victorian, historians have tended to pass quickly from the early and apparently isolated texts of Coleridge's descent of Broad Stand and Wordsworth's climbing to the raven's nest in *The Prelude* straight to the Victorian era. Along the way there has been a tacit acceptance of John Ruskin's and Leslie Stephen's view that 'the Romantic response to mountains was defined by an imaginative, transcendent sensibility.' On the contrary, Bainbridge demonstrates that scientific enquiry, like that of de Saussure in the Alps, had its parallels in Romantic period ascents; that bodily experience and achievement is represented in this writing alongside the imaginative; that the role of imagination itself is more complex than supposed transcendence; that the elevated summit view challenges the picturesque; that Burke's sublime is displaced by real fear of falling; that group ascents, of mixed sex, countered the assumptions of lonely male Romantic epiphanies; that Wordsworth offered the imperative to 'climb every day' as a 'correction' to 'Despondency'; that 'British mountaineers are the inheritors of Swiss liberty' in Wordsworth's political publication in response to the war with France; and that George Mallory took Keats to Everest in 1824! (Okay, read 1924.)

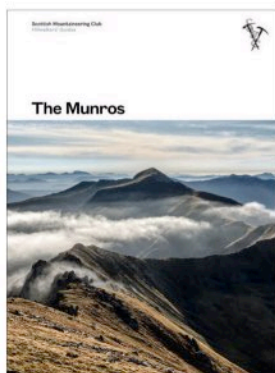
But the chapter on women and mountaineering is a revelation. Bainbridge begins with the fact that by 1798 a satire called *The Lakers* by James Plumptre could feature 'Veronica', dressed for an ascent of Skiddaw in an Alpine 'green veil' and 'her gown fantastically drawn up.' In 1775 an anonymous woman writer gives an account of a party with at least two other women ascending Snowdon. Among those who followed, Bainbridge's roll-call of

the ten women named in written accounts is impressive. Aside from Dorothy Wordsworth with her friend Mary Barker, and novelist Ann Radcliffe's popularising account of her ascent of Skiddaw by pony, there are some remarkable stories in this chapter, including those of 'singular females'. In 1825 Ellen Weeton climbed Snowdon as part of a 25-mile solo walk, often walking away from the popular paths in order to avoid meeting men and so getting a reputation in the valley for rashness and irresponsibility. At one point she inevitably comes across a 'gentleman and his guide'. The latter shouts directions. 'I was quite deaf [...] I knew the way perfectly well, for my Map and my Guide had been well studied at home.'

On the other hand Sarah Murray's solo accounts revel in being observed in places that some men find hard to access: 'On my return from the promontory I met four travellers, males, not very active in body, who came tumbling down the banks, with fright and dismay, that made me smile.' Smiling even more must have been 'the lady of fashion' who, in the words of Murray's 1799 book, 'left on purpose a bottle of whiskey on the summit' of Ben Nevis in order to drop this information 'before some Highland men, as a piece of carelessness'. Sure enough, one of them 'slipped away, and mounted to the pinnacle', to both the lady's and Sarah Murray's amusement.

Perhaps typical of the revisions and reversals in this book is Thomas Wilkinson's 1805 description of the three Smith sisters of Coniston with whom he made 'an engagement' to climb Helvellyn. But, fearing snow and ice, he reneged on his promise to take them up on the appointed day. When next he met them he found that they had 'shod their staffs with iron' and gone up without him. He commiserated 'in the language of pity for cold fingers and toes. They ridiculed my effeminacy, telling me that they had all three made the summit without a guide, and that they were so delighted with their excursion, that two of them repeated their journey the next day.' Here is mountaineering for fun, with skill and confidence, well before the Victorian era and on Britain's wild mountains. Ten years of research have produced a radical, revisionary and rewarding book that restores the Romantic period to its place in the British 'literary cultures of climbing'.

Terry Gifford



The Munros

Scottish Mountaineering Club: Hillwalkers' Guides
Rab Anderson and Tom Prentice

Scottish Mountaineering Press, 2021, pp384, £30

Hunkered down in the lee of a boulder on Ca Whims, it's time for a snack and coffee. Less than a kilometre east rises the unspectacular summit of Tom Buidhe (957m) of which this lunch spot is but a knobbly protrusion. I've arrived here from Glen Clunie over Càrn an Tuirc (1019m) and Tolmount (958m). So yes, I'm Munro bagging.

It's an admission I would have been reluctant to make not many years ago. Climbers have tended to view Munro baggers and hillwalkers in general with a superior disdain. But age mellows us. I know of a good half-dozen climbers – Kalymnos hot rock and Cogne ice types – who are now busily ticking off Scotland's 3,000-footers. Confinement to these shores by Covid restrictions has provided a respectable excuse.

But we're late starters. There are 282 Munros listed in this latest Scottish Mountaineering Club guide, down a couple on the previous (third) 1999 edition. Amongst Munro anoraks (was the term ever more appropriately applied?) there is an inevitable question: 'how many more have you got to go?' It's one I can only guess at. Until recently, the Highlands have been, for me, primarily a winter destination; hills offering a fun ski descent, irrespective of whether they surpass the coveted 3,000ft mark, have been the focus. The best have been skinned up repeatedly over the years while nearby Munros too bare or bouldery have been ignored.

Nor am I a meticulous record keeper. From sporadic diaries and notebooks I reckon I've 'ticked' about 100, which means (sticking to round numbers) that at my current rate and performance I'll be pushing 100 years old before that final celebratory summit. I'm not ordering the champagne just yet.

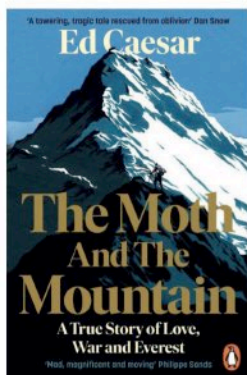
Nevertheless, I'll keep plugging away, subject always to Ms Sturgeon's increasingly authoritarian manoeuvres with Covid-pretext travel restrictions. Often in the last year or so words of Hermann Hesse have come to mind: 'Nothing on earth is more disgusting, more contemptible than borders.' Yet politicians feast on them. Half an hour from home, passing Gretna, there it is, 'Fàilte gu Alba'. Listen to the dominant voices from Holyrood and you'd be forgiven for wondering just how 'welcome'.

I'm straying though. For the moment the vital document to carry north is this splendid, extensively revised and updated guide to the Munros: a passport of sorts I suppose, but a passport to pleasure, and maybe just a little temporary pain. On the subject of pain – and for most of us of mature years that word screams knees – this 2021 guide puts more emphasis than its predecessors on the use of bikes for long approaches.

A good example is the ascent of Càrn an Fhìdhleir (994m) and An Sgarsoch way out in the west of the west Mounth. Few Munros are this remote. To take in both summits from the NTS car park at the Linn of Dee is a round trip of 42km. According to timings given here, including 810m of ascent, that's an 11-hour day on foot, but just 7h 30m if a bike is used to the ruin of Geldie Lodge. Think of that as a saving of 3h 30m of pounded knee cartilage. I'd be hobbling well before the Linn of Dee hove into sight.

The guide notes that arriving at a standard bike time is more difficult than it is for walking, however those given for approaches in the Cairngorms are certainly close enough. The 1999 edition, edited by Donald Bennet, offered no bike times at all, merely stating that for the two Munros above 'a bicycle is a great help'. Quite so.

Another improvement in the matter of timings is that the new guide acknowledges the sometimes-wearying return journey and gives a time and



The strange fate of Maurice Wilson, while a footnote in the history of Everest, was always a poignant human story for climbers. The reaction of the men who discovered his body in 1935, Charles Warren, Eric Shipton et al, was not dismissive or critical. They understood only too well the nature of obsession, the inexplicable challenge of the mountain they all faced. Despite the gulf in experience and knowledge, who were they to judge? Wilson's reputation as one of those reckless oddballs the English seem to produce so effortlessly made him an easy subject for the newspapers. Learning to fly so you can attempt Everest? Mad! Yet the general public quickly forgot. The ascent of Everest in 1953 rekindled interest in the mountain, and in the aftermath journalist Dennis Roberts wrote a book about Wilson: *I'll Climb Mount Everest Alone*.

That book was, as *New Yorker* writer Ed Caesar observes 'corrosively wrong' and hamstrung by a deal Roberts cut with Wilson's friend Enid Evans, one third of a unusual but nevertheless contented *ménage à trois* she shared with Maurice and her husband Len in their Maida Vale apartment in the early 1930s, shortly before Wilson's great adventure. If Roberts wanted material for his book, there would be no mention of any of that. Worse, Enid's view of Maurice Wilson was distorted. Her lover left out anything from his already colourful life story that might disturb and consequently Enid didn't know her lover as well as she thought she did. Ed Caesar's great skill is to put the story back on an even keel and tell it with such pace and élan that his book *The Moth and the Mountain* is an absolute delight, full of energy and sympathetic to his subject's complex, moody nature.

height gain for the whole day – there *and back* – not just the time and height gain to the summit(s). Though you could probably make a fair stab yourself at estimating the return leg, it's good to have a reminder that at the top the job is only half done. It also speaks of the attention to detail that has been poured into a book that is simply bigger and better than its predecessor.

Authors Rab Anderson and Tom Prentice have clearly spent days and days tramping the hills, checking route changes – new ATV tracks for example – and taking photographs. There has been a wholesale change of illustrations, many of which are superb. Gone is out-dated clothing and also much of the snow. The book has a less wintry feel than Bennet's edition, with the hills looking much like their everyday selves, and as you are likely to encounter them in these globally warmed times.

Just browsing through is a pleasure. The double page photos that begin each section – the book adheres to the 17 groups of summits as originally designated by Sir Hugh Munro – are sumptuous. As the eye is drawn in, the mind is saying, 'If this is Munro bagging, count me in!' Outstanding, though it's hard to choose, is Rab Anderson's shot of Slioch, buttresses snow-dusted above a frigid Torridon moor-scape. And then, opening the final section, 'The Islands', comes Robert Durran's wonderful shot along



Recovering Wilson's correspondence helped, sold to German author Peter Meier-Hüsing by Roberts, and Caesar tracked down Wilson's grand-nephew who had a box of documents and photographs to share. He captures Wilson's early years in Bradford, his aspirant working-class father's move to the suburbs, recreates Wilson's military service and the devastation the Great War wreaked on the family's prospects, prompting in Maurice a restless dissatisfaction so many of his generation shared. Most impressively of all, Caesar fills in the missing years Wilson spent in the Antipodes, the two marriages, of which Enid knew nothing, his moderate success and the

shadow of depression that was never far away. He's also good on the incoherent, new-age worldview Wilson developed, a mix of Oxford Group philosophy, doggy Blavatsky-inspired Buddhism and Gandhi-style fasting.

With the background firmly drawn, Caesar launches into the story of Wilson's improbable adventure, how he scanned through the kit list of Hugh Rutledge's expedition and bought a Gypsy Moth, which he rechristened Ever-Wrest. You're actively cheering as he thumbs his nose at the imperial establishment that tries to stop him on his journey, but the truth is that despite all the headlines and talk, he dies alone of cold and exhaustion with the real test still ahead. One question Caesar doesn't answer, perhaps because it is likely unanswerable, is why Wilson took such pains to learn to fly but didn't bother to do any climbing that would prepare him for the rigours of Everest. Recommended.

• *The Moth and the Mountain*, by Ed Caesar, is out in paperback, published by Penguin at £11.

the Cuillin, taken from Sgùrr Dearg with Sgùrr na Banachdaich and Sgùrr a' Ghreadaich cutting into a pale sky. If I'm reading the shadow aright, this is an early morning shot, the rising sun turning the Black Cuillin to red. It must be three decades since four of us scampered along the full traverse (quite likely the best day's 'bagging' you can get). Pouring over Section 17 whets the appetite to go back and savour these fine summits just one or two at a helping.

The route maps too are more detailed than the 1999 edition, drawn from out-of-copyright mapping supplemented by on-the-ground observation. A further innovation is the inclusion of section-by-section Munros Tables at the back of the book, and even a list of the Furths: the 34 summits of over 3,000ft in Britain and Ireland furth (outside) of Scotland. It's something to refer to, perhaps, in the event of further border closures.

Alongside the Tables is a blank column headed 'Date climbed'. Maybe I'll get round to filling that in one day. It will never be complete but publication of this inspirational guide to arguably Scotland's finest asset – The Munros – has provided a powerful stimulus for the journey.

Stephen Goodwin



Performing Mountains

Edited by Jonathan Pitches

Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, pp306, £100

Looking back, from the beginning there was a remarkable amount of performance in the International Festival of Mountaineering Literature's 21-year history. At the first festival Ed Drummond spoke his poems whilst ascending his 20ft tripod. We had a play that was performed on a climbing wall, Ian Smith dressed in drag to read a winning entry to the *High* writing competition, Rosie Smith's band played Tom Patey songs, there were new songs from

Moira Viggers, a moving monologue from Steve Ashton and the sound of the Canadian Rockies performed by Sid Marty. Joe Simpson's performances were always dramatic, especially in wanting to pick a fight with the organiser for the lack of bar. Some thought that Jim Curran dropping papers and re-shuffling them was deliberate empathy-inducing drama. Johnny Dawes performed an answer to an exam question set by the audience: 'My first time'. Hard to forget his twinkling glance at the audience as he was led off to write his answer by a female student invigilator: pure Dawes impish performance.

When I was a kid in Cambridge on Rag Day the CUMC would peg their way up the pavement on Kings Parade in crowd-pulling horizontal climbing. Surprisingly, the sport of Extreme Ironing was not invented until 1980 by Tony Hiam in the Yorkshire Dales, although Albert Smith would surely have incorporated it, if he'd thought of it, in his *Ascent of Mont Blanc* shows at the Egyptian Rooms in London in the 1850s. Of all these examples of 'performing mountains' only Albert Smith's is discussed in this ground-breaking book by the professor of theatre and performance at the University of Leeds. And, yes, the famous Leeds Wall features, not least in the delightful irony that it was demolished to make way for the author's office (and a performance space that in 2018 hosted a tribute to Johnny Dawes).

The book begins by pointing out how little the study of cultural practices feature in academic mountain studies (4% of 2,500 researchers listed by the Swiss-based Mountain Research Initiative). This is at odds with the explosion of popular interest in mountain arts, although even here films, then books, dominate. This book is pioneering in studying all forms of hybrid mountain performativity from vertical dance (using harnesses and ropes) to participatory skywalks (constructed exposed walkways 'performed' on for social media sharing). Following 'Part 1: Mountain Studies Meets Performance', 'Part 2: Mountains in Ritual, Drama and Site-Related Performance' establishes the international reach of Pitches' research, from Remembrance Day on Great Gable to the site-based arts festival at Persepolis, Iran, where a plan to blow the top off a mountain for dramatic effect was apparently only averted by the budget. Part 3 moves from 'Mountains in Microcosm: The Artistry of Training in the Studio and on the Wall' to 'From Mont Blanc to the Matterhorn: Deep and Dark Play in the Alps' in which

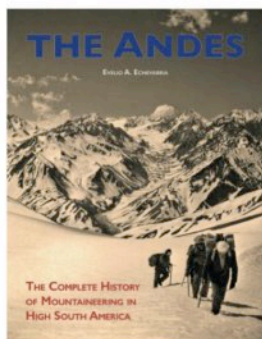
'Eiger watching' is discussed as an example of 'dark tourism' in an 'acting-spectating dynamic' underpinned by 'the notion of "just near-enough"'. Just as Pitches is critical of environmentally damaging installations and practices, he is aware of the limitations of his own terminology: 'it ceases to be play – deep or dark – when things go wrong'.

I had thought at first that the intermittent six 'Handrails' were a mistake. In these Pitches gives a brief account of the ascent of a mountain in the 10-year course of his family collecting Wainwrights on Lake District holidays. The focus of each narrative reflects in a modest way the theme of adjacent chapters: the pull of a summit, little rituals, training, family dramas: 'Site, Light and Dark Memory Put to Rest'. By the end I'd found them a moving reminder that alpinism is not so far away from the discipline and commitment of achieving a more modest mountaineering goal. But two performances I witnessed at Pitches' 'Performing Mountains' conference at Leeds in 2018 illustrate the two problems for this book that are unavoidably intrinsic to its project.

The first is to convey in words the affect of performance. Kate Lawrence re-staged her vertical dance titled *Roped Together* (2011) with her rigger and co-performer Simon Edwards. It is impossible to capture the subtle and moving expression of a dramatic narrative by two hanging dancers, as he controlled her rope and she expressed her relationship with him as a climber. Secondly David Shearing's *Black Rock* was a multi-sensory performance commemorating the 30-year anniversary of Johnny Dawes' ascent of *Indian Face* on Cloggy. Impressively immersive and imaginatively conceptual as this piece was, for me it could not come near the embodied artistry and seriousness of Dawes himself performing on rock. What does come close is Dawes' own verbal arts. He once said to me (as he must have done to others), 'The thing about gritstone is, it's all one hold.' The performativity implicit in those four words – 'it's all one hold' – is both profound and scary. The expression of what is in his head, in his spirit and in his body is a mere residue of its performance in a route he named *Braille Trail*. So subjectivity of response, such as mine to Black Rock, is a limitation that is recognised and embraced by Pitches in his evocation of performances in this book.

Priced for research libraries, *Performing Mountains* brings to centre stage the role of the Alpine Club Library. For those researching the culture of mountaineering and of mountains this landmark book will be essential reading, not least for its bibliography. For everyone else with access to Inter-library Loans this is an amazingly rich, diverse and thought-provoking study of a neglected aspect of international mountain culture.

Terry Gifford



The Andes

The Complete History of Mountaineering in High South America

Evelio A Echevarría

Joseph Reidhead & Co, 2018, pp828, £60

I'm one of those guys that prepares for more climbing trips than he actually takes. In 2002, Benny Bach and I were prepping for our third trip to South America, this time Bolivia. If memory serves, we'd put a map of Bolivia on the wall and threw a dart at it. Regardless, as soon as the objective was set – the Cordillera Quimsa Cruz – it was time to write to the 'master', Evelio Echevarría.

Evelio Echevarría, who sadly passed away late last year, was the master of information, statistics, history and trends of mountaineering in the Andes: not just his Chilean homeland, but of the *entire* continent. Starting in the late 1950s, the Santiago native sent in scores of reports to both this publication and the *American Alpine Journal* about both important and obscure ascents in the 7,000km-long mountain range. Editors at both journals became hugely indebted to Echevarría, who contributed probably a decent percentage of all the reports ever published about this still somewhat untouched mountain range. His was a quiet genius and his steady stream of reports filled in the spaces on the South American map.

Echevarría promptly wrote back to me with instructions on approaching Bolivia's Cordillera Quimsa Cruz, the main parts of the range, and decent objectives. He had suggestions for a variety of things, including transport and certain peaks in the range. It was surprising how well versed he was in a range that was a long way from his homeland. It was an impressive dossier.

In 2018, he put his more than a half century's worth of research into his life's work: *The Andes: The Complete History of Mountaineering in South America*. This book is a mind-boggler if you're a nerd for facts, figures, altitudes, and dates. At its 828-page heart, it's a door-stopping compendium of data on the mountains of South America, with information on who climbed what and when and how. The big sub-sectors of history are all in there: ascents by indigenous peoples, ascents by explorers, ascents by colonials, ascents by later generations, ascents by women, and on.

Perhaps what pleased me most about this book were the vast swathes of stories about European climbers' activities in South America, the kind of stories many Europeans and North American readers might not normally see. And, thankfully, Echevarría puts all those explorations and ascents into the context of what was happening in Europe at the time. Far beyond Whymper and Humboldt and the handful of others we're all familiar with, Echevarría links certain European events (notably the World Wars) to ascents of mountains, walls and towers in the Andes.

When the book came out and having corresponded with Echevarría for more than two decades, I decided it was finally time to meet the great man



The late Andean encyclopaedist Evelio Echevarría at home in Colorado with his son Felipe. (Cameron M Burns)

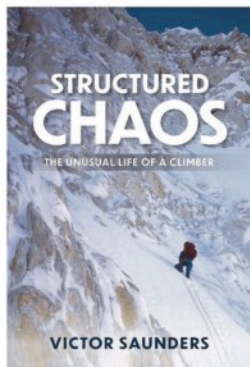
in person – hell, he lived just five hours' drive away in northern Colorado. I rocked up to his place, a modest suburban house in Loveland, Colorado, and was greeted by Echevarría and his son Felipe. We settled in for a two-hour grilling by the writer.

How did he know so much about all these mountains? How could he cover so much terrain in person? Apparently, Echevarría

took on the Andes bus route by bus route over the course of five decades. His normal on-the-ground approach to research was simple: fly to a country's capital city, then start taking buses up into the hills. The bus routes he chose typically ended in a tiny village or outpost, oftentimes a mine, where few humans lived and surrounded by high peaks. Then he'd just take off into the wilderness with a backpack, a stove, a tent and some food. He climbed dozens of unclimbed peaks – walk ups – just through simple searching. He told me he never considered himself a real climber as he never became proficient with the tools of mountaineering, and rather considered himself more of a peak bagger. Clearly, he was an explorer. He said he made around 100 first ascents of mountains in the Andes. The only person with more first ascents is likely Johan Reinhard, the anthropologist famous for exploring Inca burial sites over decades.

The Andes illustrates Echevarría's intimate mastery of these mountains. The book severely lacks any design bling and comes with a text-heavy presentation, but there are enough photos, maps and delightful little sketches to keep you entertained and reading for the sheer fun that mountain literature can be. But it's the massive amount of data that will bring any Andean climber into this book and prompt them to return over and over again. Each little (or big) sub-range has been represented with every scrap of information Echevarría could get his hands on. It's a wonderful legacy to a humble yet tenacious mountaineer who liked to share one of the world's great ranges.

Cameron M Burns



Structured Chaos

The Unusual Life of a Climber

Victor Saunders

Vertebrate Publishing, 2021, pp192, £24

From the outset Victor Saunders is keen to point out that his latest book is about embracing paradox and a search for 'what really matters', on and off the mountain.

The action starts with a perilous bus journey as the author attempts to reconnect with his childhood in Pekan, Malaysia. From 'the lush Malaysian jungle' his father shipped him off to a brutal 'bleak Scottish boarding school ... heartless, horrible and cold', where this small, myopic, asthmatic 'brown-skinned' boy was hopelessly out of place.

In 1969 he discovered climbing and it changed his life. Back then, 'climbers dressed as appallingly as cavers' and the scene was small. London had just one climbing shop and the assistant, the late lamented Tony Wilmott, advised the keen, inexperienced youth to: 'Go to Avon Gorge and ask for someone to climb with you.'

We soon learn that beneath the understatement and light-hearted tone there lies a steely determination. His insatiable passion and drive for adventure now spans more than five decades, climbing snow, ice, rock and rubble, from Scotland to the Himalaya. He's a brilliant raconteur: open and playful, even in the most desperate situations. The prose is tight and energetic and his writing evokes time and place wonderfully. I savoured each and every chapter.

Towards the end of the book, Saunders is living as a mountain guide in Chamonix. For most of the book, however, London is his base and he captures the drive and ambition of the 1980s scene here beautifully. He shares his passion for the capital's architecture as he seeks out popular bouldering haunts, such as the Camden canal system.

It's here that he meets 'East End miscreant' Stevie Haston. They forge a solid relationship and hatch a plan to tackle the Eigerwand in winter. Working as an architect, Saunders' training consists of walking everywhere on tiptoe and pinch gripping a briefcase in each hand on the way to the office.

Saunders has guided clients to the summit of Everest at least six times, though he barely mentions this. Instead, the writing mainly focuses on pioneering alpine-style routes on lesser-known Himalayan peaks or in small teams on bigger mountains.

His partner for a two-man attempt on Nanga Parbat in winter is Raphael, an eccentric enthusiastic Dane, someone Saunders had helped rescue from K2 a few years earlier. The expedition is brutal: day after day at -25°C. 'As planned we gave our bodies hell,' Saunders assures us. The quirky exchanges these two offbeat characters share each morning in the tent obliquely reveals their most intimate hopes and fears.



The long and frozen road. Mick Fowler on Spantik in 1987, a friendship rekindled in *Structured Chaos*. (Victor Saunders)

Structured Chaos is full of strong, 'pig-headed', driven characters. Sometimes the tension from the climbing encounters spills over. After the Eigerwand, Haston lifts the author off the ground, Saunders observing how 'the veins on the side of his neck swelled and wriggled like caterpillars ... I understood I was about to come to some real harm.' In another episode he ends up in a boxing ring with his regular climbing partner Mick Fowler.

But we sense that it's among these people and through these adventures that Saunders finds fulfilment and comes to realise that 'what really matters' is, in Colin Kirkus' phrase, 'going to the right place, at the right time, with the right people'.

It's difficult not to admire the achievements though. Reunited with Fowler the pair are still exploring desperate new lines on big unclimbed Himalayan peaks. Not bad at 72 and 65 years old respectively. Clearly this journey with those 'unspeakable friends' with 'their impossible beliefs' is not finished just yet.

Andy Cave



Never Leave The Dog Behind

Our Love of Dogs and Mountains

Helen Mort

Vertebrate Publishing, 2021, £9

'All my life, I've been terrified of dogs.' That's a sentiment I share with Helen Mort. I share, too, the genesis of her fear: an attack by a dog on a farm. Like her, I've gone out of my way to avoid dogs, interacting only with those belonging to friends and, like her, I have a scattering of memories of dog-related incidents which left me bitten, panicked and ever after fearful.

What I also have in common with her, this author I have never met, is an obsession with high places: 'the complete happiness' she describes at being in the mountains is mine too. And so I came to this book with curiosity: how could dog and mountain combine to elevate the experience of climbing, walking or simply being among peaks? How do dogs inhabit these wild places and what can we learn from that juxtaposition, or, rather, triangulation of dog, owner and mountain?

In Helen Mort's hands we learn a great deal: the 13 essays that comprise the book are painstakingly researched and wide-ranging. The rich weave of subject matter is threaded through with the intimacy of personal experience and liberally salted with forays into poetry, philosophy, history, spirituality and the supernatural with never an intellectual toe in the water but always signposting new directions of exploration into the relationship between dogs and mountains, those 'theatres of risk, drama and heroism'. There is no slide into intellectual dryness: the lyricism of Mort's writing and her passion for the subject matter carry the reader along the physical and emotional journey in which she is engaged. Her finely honed sense of place transports the reader to the mountains she so joyfully inhabits, describing dawn light as 'an egg cracked over the Cumbrian mountains.'

Mort's affinity with dogs began when she volunteered to be a dog walker and so met her whippet, Bell. Taking her into the mountains opened up new perspectives for Mort, initially an awareness of the duality of dog behaviour. The devoted domestic pet became an independent explorer with a 'cool disregard' for abandoned hunting forays, able to move easily between human perceptions of the range of animal behaviours.

Interviews she includes similarly broaden our understanding of the many-faceted nature of the relationship between humans and their dogs. Chris Bonington believes that while climbing partnerships, thriving on competition and fuelled by ego and ambition, always come to an end, a dog continues to give unquestioning devotion. As Mort puts it: 'With a dog, you are never alone again.' The other side of the coin, of course, is the severity of loss. Lucy Creamer describes the death of her beloved dog and climbing companion Kodo as 'horrendous, like losing a child.' There is, too, a sense of liberation, derived from taking dogs to hills and crags, a feeling that their owners can



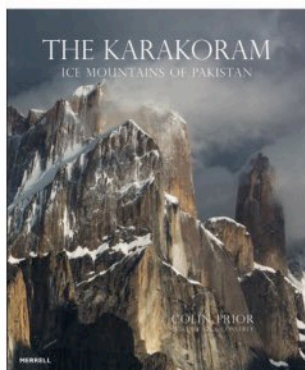
The poet Helen Mort, and friend. (*John Houlihan*)

absorb the unbridled pleasure they derive from roaming the outdoors.

Mort's 'curious, questing' approach leads her to meet, among others, search-and-rescue dogs, St Bernards, ill-treated dogs rehabilitated in the mountains and notable dogs from history, but her meditations always return to the central idea of how dogs help us connect with mountains. Alongside this steady narrative pulse is a much more intimate juxtaposition with her 'attempt to make sense of a chapter of my own life.' She writes openly about her obsessions and addictions, difficulties past and present, and observes them as she does her dogs, simultaneously deeply rooted in her consciousness but almost from 'an alien perspective'. This is most evident when she writes about her unborn child who, like the dogs she loves so much, leads her to a new way of making sense of what she sees in the landscape before her. The 'necessary unselfishness' she has learned when taking her dogs to the hills and crags will be mirrored in the responsibility she has to shoulder when her child is born.

Five pages of notes, a bibliography and further reading extend the spirit of exploration. Mort's preparation and research for writing this book have clearly been meticulous. But she clearly wanted her response to her subject to be instinctive, too and it's her experience of falling in love with a dog that sings out of every chapter of the book. She has 'let my thoughts roam, like a dog on a fellside, following my instinct.'

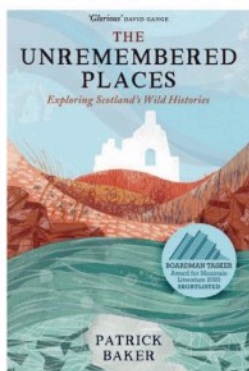
Val Johnson



Now in his early 60s, Colin Prior made his reputation in the 1980s with his richly lit panoramic images of Highland mountains, but his path to the mountains was convoluted. Born in Glasgow, Prior left school uncertain about his future and for a while worked as an operations manager for the same international welding company as his father. A growing interest in scuba diving led him in his early 20s to experiment with underwater photography; this was his route in to taking pictures for a living. After a spell as a photographic technician on a North Sea oil platform, he established his own business and has rarely looked back, although the industry, thanks to digital photography and the Internet, is now less lucrative than it was when he started. He put away his pano-

ramic cameras in 2021 and in recent years his work has concentrated in a more detailed way on his passion for nature, although still with his same feeling for light that was a hallmark of his earlier work. Last year he was given the Scottish Award for Excellence in Mountain Culture.

As he became well known Prior was able to balance personal projects with commercial commissions like the four years he shot the British Airways calendar. His latest book, *The Karakoram: Ice Mountains of Pakistan* has been, quite obviously, very much a passion. Shot over a quarter of a century, Prior was first inspired in his mid twenties by his discovery of Galen Rowell's book *In the Throne Room of the Mountain Gods* (1977) in his local library. One picture in particular stood out for Prior, of the Trango Towers, and while they are obviously photogenic, the intensity Prior achieves in this book with his images of the same peaks is striking. Like Rowell, Prior zeroes in on the golden hour at



The Unremembered Places

Patrick Baker

Birlinn, 2020, 228pp, £9.99

We all have them, those moments when making a journey in the wild we come across a man-made feature that's inexplicable; a few chiselled stones perhaps, that suggest they were once part of a building but without logic as to why they are where they are, miles from anywhere, miles from any other hint of habitation. Or there's a half-hidden cave, a burial mound, a deserted bothy in which we sense a kind of unease, as though something tragic once happened there.

The wilder the country, the more we scratch our heads and wonder.

Not all of these unremembered places are remote and hard to find, but each one has an atmosphere of its own that has become woven into folklore. A number of them have written histories recording events from long ago before men and women went a-wandering for the simple pleasure of being somewhere different. Delve into their mysteries and you discover the

sunrise and sunset. Although Rowell's work can seem, to my eye, and from today's perspective, sometimes overblown, Prior catches the austerities of the Karakoram, as well as the grandeur and beauty. He captures, in fact, the spirit of the range.

He's helped in this by balancing sumptuous colour shots with stunningly reproduced duotones, three of which are reproduced in this edition of the *Alpine Journal*, on the cover and the endpapers. I'd also mention in particular a landscape shot of the Trango Towers across two pages captured as a storm clears, leaving the mountains plastered in fresh snow. It's phenomenally sharp and perfectly reproduced, the threads of cloud still clinging to the face capturing that sense you have looking up at a potential challenge in less than friendly conditions, that paradoxical blend of beauty and threat. Alongside the landscapes are a series of portraits of some of the locals he's met along the way. It's good to include an indigenous human touch, although if the book has one flaw it's that these images are too large, their scale jarring somewhat with that of the mountains. The range of ethnic origins in the faces, however, is a good reminder of this region's long and complex human history.

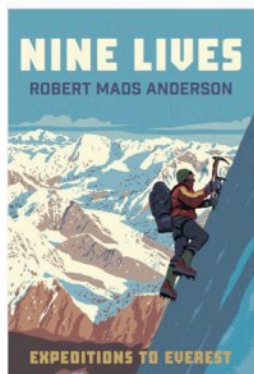
The conventional wisdom is that picture books no longer sell but if you have a passion for mountains in general and the Karakoram in particular you will want this book. Prior has included notes from each of the trips he made pursuing his interest and there's an essay on photographing the Karakoram from historian Mick Conefrey. The man Conefrey concentrates on is Vittorio Sella. Every photographer who has gone to the Karakoram since has had their efforts compared to the man Conefrey correctly identifies as the world's greatest mountain photographer. Most have been found wanting but you sense that Sella would have given a nod of approval to the best of these.

• Colin Prior's *The Karakoram: Ice Mountains of Pakistan* is published by Merrell at £50.

brutality of centuries past when drovers and uneducated labourers endured unimaginable hardships, existing in atrocious conditions because there was no alternative. For them it was often a case of shiver, starve and die.

Scotland is peppered with such places, and author Patrick Baker's journeys among them form the thread of this fascinating book. His curiosity is infectious, as travelling on foot or by canoe he explores remote (and not so remote) places, questions their existence, digs into their histories and tells their stories with an honest prose that creeps into the reader's emotions. No wonder *The Unremembered Places* was shortlisted for the 2020 Boardman Tasker prize.

Kev Reynolds



Nine Lives

Expeditions to Everest

Robert Mads Anderson

Vertebrate Publishing, 2020, pp204, £15

It was 1984. A bunch of Norwegians in Mrs Davie's Hotel, Rawalpindi were about to drive away up the Karakoram Highway, but first they had a small problem to solve. They had just bought the kitchenware needed for base camp including a nested set of five aluminium cooking pots, except their dictionary had supplied the word for 'kettle' rather than 'pan' and now, instead of cooking pots, they had a lovely set of five tea kettles in five sizes from a massive three litres to a dinky one-cup. The leader, Hans Christian Doseth pointed at the kettles.

'Ah, so, we should say pot not kettle?'

The Norwegians went off to make a hard new aid route on Trango while we headed off to Hunza. Doseth was slated to climb with Robert Anderson on Everest's west ridge the following year but sadly he was killed on descent from Trango. This seems to have been the first of many tangential connections I had with Anderson. The following year, I was attempting to climb Rimo I in the eastern Karakoram when Steve Venables dropped his rucksack with most of our bivouac kit. We were six days up the climb at 7,000m with no stove. Three years after that Steve went on to make one of the most remarkable ascents of Everest on an expedition led by Anderson. In the years since I have bumped into him in Europe, Nepal (we shared neighbouring base camps in 2010), Antarctica and most recently in 2019 in Pakistan. He is still at it, and still loving it all. The opportunity to review this book was an offer I could not refuse.

Over a period of 25 years Anderson was obsessed with climbing the Big One and this book is about that obsession. (In addition to his obsession, Robert must also have amazing secret powers when it comes to raising money for expeditions. Perhaps this is the Everest Effect. Lesser mountains do not seem to be very attractive to potential sponsors.) Its scale is illustrated by the list of expeditions the book covers.

1985 West ridge, turning round just 250m from the summit.

1988 Kangshung face, when Stephen Venables reached the top, doing, as Reinhold Messner said, 'a very hard thing, but you were lucky.'

1990 Super-couloir (meaning the Hornbein Couloir Direct, or Japanese Route), retreating from 7,700m.

1991 Anderson Couloir start to the north ridge, solo to 8,200m.

1992 North ridge, the standard route from Tibet, turning back at 8,200m.

1993 The Great Couloir to 8,410m.

1995 The Great Couloir again, this time to 8,100m.

1999 North ridge in winter stopped by the mountain at 7,000m.

2003 South Col route guiding to the top.

2010 South Col route guiding to the top again.

When you look at these nine expeditions list, it's clear that no one on Earth has a greater personal experience of so many different aspects of the mountain. Perhaps because of his intimate knowledge of its geography, Robert, skimps a little on physical descriptions in his writing. The photographs help in this respect, but a scattering of maps would have clarified most of the locational questions that the average reader, lacking this knowledge, might ask.

Otherwise, the writing is fluid and engaging; it's a fun read. You are led seamlessly from expedition to expedition. The stories are studded with short passages of internal reflection, bordering on free writing (it used to be called stream of consciousness in my day), which gives an excellent insight into his mind-set. The reader will feel very much present as Robert contemplates the deceptive and hard choices between ambition and staying alive. The stories also demonstrate his obvious compassion for his companions, which I think is a good thing. If you want to know what goes through the mind of a man obsessed with climbing one mountain for half a lifetime, then I can wholly recommend this book.

Victor Saunders