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

by Maurice Isserman and Stewart Weaver, with maps and peak sketches by Dee Molenaar.
Yale University Press, 579 pp., $39.95

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

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

Political historians do not usually bother with a subject as esoteric and seemingly frivolous as climbing, al-
though mountaineering books are now accumulating as relentlessly as the Hi-
malaya itself. A mere half-century ago, moun-
tain climbing was still a minor-
ity pastime for an eccentric few who took pleasure in doing things the hard way, in steep places and bad weather, and were willing to risk injuring them-
selves in the process. Since risk and the adrenalin high that went with it were of interest only to those unfor-
tunate enough to live in them. In the Himalaya, they were holy places, a perpetual reminder of the gods—the Tibetan name for Everest is Cho-
molungma, “Goddess Mother of the World.” And their summits were for-
bidden to mere mortals. In Europe, superstitious Alpine peasants believed mountain tops were the abodes of witches, devils, and dragons. Lowland-
ners and people of sense chose to ignore the peaks, dismissing them as mere incondensations—“considerable protu-
berances,” Dr. Johnson called them—out there to make life difficult for the civilized traveler.

According to Isserman and Weaver, the general change in European atti-
tudes toward mountains began around the middle of the eighteenth century, with the Gothic revival, the cult of the picturesque, and Edmund Burke’s aesthetic distinction between the Beautiful—the regular, the propor-
tioned, the visually predictable—and the Sublime—the dramatic, the unexpected, the awe inspir-
ing—which thus provided... a ready vocabulary for the novel ex-
perience of mountain wonder.

For aesthetes, appreciating the beauty of the Alps was altogether differ-
ent from climbing them. When John Ruskin was invited to lecture to the Alpine Club in 1865, seven years after its foundation, he used the occasion to denounce its members as Philistines: You have despised nature [and] all the deep and sacred sensations of natural scenery... The French revolutionists made stables of the cathedrals of France; you have made racecourses of the cathed-
rals of the earth... The Alps themselves, which your own poets used to love so reverently, you look upon as soaped poles in bear gar-
dens, which you set yourselves to climb and slide down again, with “shrieks of delight.”

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

There were differences between them, of course, but temperament aside, they were differences of nurture, not nature. It was partly Ruskin who had been privately educated at home by tutors, whereas most of the founding members of the Alpine Club had suffered the rigors of a board school education de-
designed to train the right kind of men to administer the British Empire. A taste for strenuous exercise, adventure, and deprivation had been beaten into them along with Greek and Latin, and mountaineering was a perfect way of satisfying it. “The authentic English-
man,” Leslie Stephen wrote cheerfully, “is one who spends all day among rocks and snow; and to come as near breaking his neck as his conscience will allow.” For Ruskin, art critic and lover of mountain land-
scapes, snobbery was a hazard.

Snobbery, of course, figured large in “the intensely status-conscious eyes of the Raj,” far larger, in fact, than the mountaineers themselves, especially in the first half of the nineteenth century, when no sensible person dreamed of climbing them for pleasure. For Victor-
ian mountaineers, the Himalaya was important as a natural frontier, and mapping and measuring it was a handy way of laying claim to the terri-
tory. Hence the Great Trigonometri-
cal Survey of India, a hundred-year project miss-
takenly called the “grid-iron” of triangulated calculations of the heights and positions of all the peaks. Like every other Himalayan enterprise, this was a bone-wearying business, invol-
ving hardship, brute labor, cold, hunger, and exhaustion, as well as technical skill in using heavy equipment such as sight post, ranging instruments, and the 15,000-to-20,000-foot summits.

The survey was a triumph of dogged-
ness over adversity and also a major step in encoding the boundaries of the Raj. While the work was in prog-
ress, the cartographers either numbered the peaks or used the local names. When all the measurements had been
calculated and the maps had been drawn, Peak XV was established as the highest of them all. In honor of the Great Triangrometrical Survey and its recently retired supervisor, they named it Everest.

For Westerners, the Himalaya and the once closed kingdoms that contain it—Tibet, Nepal—have always seemed enticingly strange: not only a romantically distant land with mountains twice as high as the highest Alps, but also a great blank sheet on which to project whatever fantasy one possesses. In the early days, merely getting there was a major undertaking: a five-week sea voyage to Calcutta, an eighteen-hour train journey to Darjeeling; then there were guides and interpreters to be hired, people to cook and clean and set up camp, columns of porters to carry the gear, and a six-week trek into the hills. For those not employed by the Raj, the Himalaya was the preserve of the rich. More importantly, his team included Vittorio Sella, one of the greatest of all mountain photographers, who immortalized the expedition in a series of brilliant, atmospheric pictures. The duke’s purpose was to climb K2; “the next year,” he wrote. The next day he further reinforced his reputation for recklessness by climbing straight down past the scene of the accident without pausing to see if anyone had survived.

The Italian expedition was a model of style and efficiency but the duke had gone to the Himalaya in the same spirit as he had gone climbing: he had been in the Ruwenzori—for the fun of it, for adventure, and without ulterior political motives. Not so the British, for whom Everest was a matter of national pride, a continuation of the Raj by other means. They had created an empire on which the sun never set, but their explorers had failed to reach the North Pole and had been beaten by the Norwegians in the race to the South Pole. That left Everest, “the Third Pole”: “Amundsen’s undisputed conquest of the South Pole,” said the authors, “and, even more, the poignant defeat and death in retreat of Robert Scott...seized the public imagination.” Everest had a great deal in common with the two poles: it was lethally cold and in its thin air every upward step required a physical effort no less relentless and exhausting than manhandling a heavy sledge across the polar ice. That made it an ideal testing ground for virtues the British valued most: fortitude, perseverance, and the kind of docile courage with which early explorers uncomplainingly suffered unspeakable hardships.

All those qualities were tested to the breaking point during World War I, then tested again at high altitude in the Himalaya. Everest offered “a few lucky survivors one more chance to die gracefully for their country,” and they did so in the same dogged way in which they had fought the war:

It must be consolidated and held, and no man must ever abandon an inch of ground won, or turn his back to the mountain once he has started the attack. A retreat has a disastrous moral effect...” One could hardly ask for a clearer articulation of the Great indisputable sovereign of the region,” according to the expedition’s chronicler, “gigantic and solitary...jealously defended by a vast throng of vassal peaks, protected from invasion by miles and miles of glacier.” K2 is now reckoned to be the most difficult of all the eight-thousand-meter peaks, and by far the most hazardous: to date, only 305 climbers have reached its summit and at least seventy-six have died trying. The duke’s attempt failed, but in other ways it was a triumph: his scientists gathered their data as planned, and Amadeo himself proved that survival at great altitude was possible by climbing higher and staying up there longer than anyone before him. He also left the Abruzzi name on a major ridge, thereby establishing Italy’s claim to K2, which was duly honored, though not until 1954.

The grandest of the early Himalayan expeditions, and also the least eccentric, was that of Luigi Amadeo, Duke of the Abruzzi, in 1909. Amadeo was an explorer, sportsman, accomplished climber, and grandson of the king of Italy. He brought with him a team of four guides, three porters, a cartographer, and a doctor, all of them Italian. He also brought with him 13,000 pounds of stores and equipment: everything from clothing and climbing gear to food and medicine, cameras, photogrammetric survey supplies, meteorological instruments, and more, all in seemingly limitless profusion. It was a vast load that required three hundred Ladakhi and Balti porters and sixty transport ponies to carry.

*Three years later, in 1905, Crowley led a disastrous expedition of his own to Kangchenjunga that resulted in four deaths. Crowley, who had heard their stories, was driven by a passion to climb Peak XV. Before him. He also left the Abruzzi name on a major ridge, thereby establishing Italy’s claim to K2, which was duly honored, though not until 1954.

For those not employed by the Raj, the Himalaya was the preserve of the rich. More importantly, his team included Vittorio Sella, one of the greatest of all mountain photographers, who immortalized the expedition in a series of brilliant, atmospheric pictures. The duke’s purpose was to climb K2; “the next year,” he wrote. The next day he further reinforced his reputation for recklessness by climbing straight down past the scene of the accident without pausing to see if anyone had survived.

The Italian expedition was a model of style and efficiency but the duke had gone to the Himalaya in the same spirit as he had gone climbing: he had been in the Ruwenzori—for the fun of it, for adventure, and without ulterior political motives. Not so the British, for whom Everest was a matter of national pride, a continuation of the Raj by other means. They had created an empire on which the sun never set, but their explorers had failed to reach the North Pole and had been beaten by the Norwegians in the race to the South Pole. That left Everest, “the Third Pole”: “Amundsen’s undisputed conquest of the South Pole,” said the authors, “and, even more, the poignant defeat and death in retreat of Robert Scott...seized the public imagination.” Everest had a great deal in common with the two poles: it was lethally cold and in its thin air every upward step required a physical effort no less relentless and exhausting than manhandling a heavy sledge across the polar ice. That made it an ideal testing ground for virtues the British valued most: fortitude, perseverance, and the kind of docile courage with which early explorers uncomplainingly suffered unspeakable hardships.

All those qualities were tested to the breaking point during World War I, then tested again at high altitude in the Himalaya. Everest offered “a few lucky survivors one more chance to die gracefully for their country,” and they did so in the same dogged way in which they had fought the war:

Weren't Everest “1,000 feet lower it would have been climbed in 1924. Were it 1,000 feet higher it would have been an engineering problem,” said Peter Lloyd, a member of another unsuccessful Everest expedition, in 1938. At 29,000 feet, Everest is already nudging the jet stream; if winter comes early the jet stream drops a centi- meter of snow for every kilometer of altitude, and for Mallory, who had the stamina of a marathon runner, it was heaven. It was also beautiful and for Mallory, as for his Bloomsbury friends, beauty mattered.

We caught the gleam of snow behind the grey mists. A whole group of mountains began to appear in gigantic fragments. Mountain shapes are often fantastic seen through a mist; these were like the wildest creation of a dream. A preposterous triangular lump rose out of the depths; its edge came leaping up at an angle of about 70° and ended nowhere. To the left a black serrated crest was hanging in the sky incredibly. Gradually, very gradually, we saw the great mountain sides and glaciers and aretes, now one fragment and now another through the floating riffs, until far higher in the sky than imagination had dared to suggest, the white summit of Everest appeared. And in this series of partial glimpses we had seen a whole: we were able to piecemeal together the fragments, to interpret the dream.

War mentality; in laying siege to Everest in this way, the 1922 expedition established a military model for Himalayan mountaineering that lasted half a century, and in its ears despite its patent failure in 1922. Ismayer and Waier have no time for the cult of heroic failure, nor for the cult of heroic failure, and “the high rhetoric of empire and war [that] took over” in 1924, when the deaths of George Leigh Mallory and Andrew Irvine were made public and the two young climbers became “the glorious dead” and Everest “the finest cenotaph in the world.” By the time he died, Mallory was on his third attempt at the mountain and knew how much hardship was involved. He was also in love with the place. For a climber accustomed to the Alps, the sheer scale of the great Himalayan peaks was irresistible: Everest is not just higher than Mont Blanc, it is almost double the height—higher by two and a half times than Mount Everest is from sea level. One of the Base Camp to summit, with approach marches reckoned in weeks, not hours, and routes measured in miles instead of feet. For a climber like Mallory, who had the stamina of a marathon runner, it was heaven. It was also beautiful and for Mallory, as for his Bloomsbury friends, beauty mattered.

Everest in this way, the 1922 expedition used a method of advance by stages, laying andstocking through repeated marches a series of six ascending camps or depots roughly five miles apart on the glacier and 2,000 vertical feet apart on the mountain. The true inspiration for this cumbersome business seems to have been the British Army’s incremental experience of the western front. “In this Polar method of advance,” wrote John Noel [the expedition photographer], “there is an essential psychological principle to be maintained. Each advance, each depot built, must be considered as ground won from the mountain. It must be consolidated and held, and no man must ever abandon an inch of ground won, or turn his back to the mountain once he has started the attack. A retreat has a disastrous moral effect...” One could hardly ask for a clearer articulation of the Great

The Nepal Review
style that they climbed in the Alps: casually and sportingly, in the spirit of adventure, and strictly as amateurs, with inadequate clothing—tweed and wool turned out to be the prevalent clothing for the job: a natural leader, sympathetic, good-humored, charming, and with a knack for putting people at their ease. Added to a professionalism that he knew how to organize men and supplies and understand the intricate planning and strategy needed to make the complicated machine of a large expedition run smoothly, culminating in the account of Hillary and Tenzing. The conquest of Annapurna by the French, followed three years later by British success (at last) on Everest by Hillary and Tenzing, were like Chuck Yeager's breaking of the sound barrier in 1947 and Roger Bannister's four-minute mile in 1954: they broke a psychological barrier about how much the human body could withstand and at what altitude it would cease to function. Before 1950, none of the eight-thousand-meter peaks had been climbed; five years later, twelve of the fourteen giants had fallen, though only to costly military-style expeditions in the old tradition, with teams of climbers and long trains of heavily laden porters. It took another quarter-century, plus a vast improvement in gear, training, and technique, before Shipton and Tilman's casual, low-key approach to high-altitude climbing became the model for ambitious climbers. Twenty-five years after Hillary and Tenzing reached the summit of Everest, the great Tyrolean mountaineers Reinhold Messner and Peter Habeler repeated the climb without oxygen or fixed ropes, and in record time. Messner went on to climb all fourteen-eight-thousand-meter peaks, many of them solo, including a solo ascent of the north face of Everest in strict Alpine style, carrying everything he needed—lightweight tent, sleeping bag, stove, and basic rations—on his back. Messner was just one of many moun- taineering supermen who arrived during what Isserman and Weaver call “The Age of Extremes” when technically difficult new routes were climbed in increasingly fierce conditions. Polish climbers set new standards for toughness and bravery by making ascents of Everest and other eight-thousanders in winter, when temperatures sometimes went to fifty degrees below zero. But “the harder the climb, the greater their respect” for the mountain, as one of them said, “Our life [in Poland] is so hard that for us Himalayan climbing is by comparison luxurious.”

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

Once upon a time, the psychopathology of expedition life was a problem climbers kept to themselves. But manners change and these days, when travel cheap and climbers go to the Himalaya with as little fanfare as they go to the Alps or the Rockies, bad blood and outrageous behavior are the new fash-ion. They make good copy and help sell what Isserman and Weaver call “climb and tell” books in which “bruised feel-ings and simmering resentments were designed to replace frostbite and hypoxia as the signature ailments of high-altitude mountaineering.” Here is an example of the new style spirit of the hills during the disastrous 1996 season on Everest in which eight people died: Three Indian climbers were trapped high on the Northeast Ridge on May 10, and early the next morning a Japanese party intent on the sum-mit walked past them, though they were still alive. By the time the Japa-nese descended, one of the clim-bers was dead, another missing, and a third barely alive and tangled in his rope. They removed the rope from the survivor but made no effort to help him down the moun-tain. He too would die. “Above eight thousand meters,” one of the Japanese climbers offered by way of self-justification, “is not a place where people can afford morality.”

Aleister Crowley would doubtless have been proud of them and Jerry Springer might have used them on his show, but their antics make a depressing end to a fine book by two mountain lovers with a strong sense of right and wrong.