Q&A

Other Everests

Just over a century ago, two members of the 1924 British Mt. Everest expedition disappeared on the snow-covered slopes of Chomolungma. In the years that followed, the mystery of what happened to George Mallory and Sandy Irvine became one of the most famous stories from the world's tallest mountain. Meanwhile, so many of the other people and cultures with important connections to the mountain throughout history have been overlooked. The authors and editors of *Other Everests: One Mountain, Many Worlds* are trying to change that. Peter Hansen and Jonathan Westaway are two of the book's editors. Sarah Pickman authored one of the essays. ABBEY COLLINS

In the process of editing this, were there any ideas or themes that you were surprised by, or that you had previously not encountered in your research and work?

HANSEN: Let me start with one that I was expecting to find but was shown in new and really moving ways—the continuities in this history. People talk about the commercialization of Everest as something new that didn't happen in the past and that now we suffer from. [There's] ample evidence that it's been going on for a long time, since the beginning. The expedition with Mallory and Irvine in 1924 was sponsored by a film crew. It was mainly funded by the filmmaker.

Take other examples in more recent history. There's this mythology of the mountaineer as this individual who climbs by themselves and makes it to the top. [I was] expecting to find that. But you can see on Everest … it was clear that this notion of ascent as a battle between man and mountain meant anything that happened up until the point where you actually strapped on crampons and tied onto a rope, that didn't count as help for you. But … the network of getting gear to your camp, that's part of your support team, and likewise, all the things that happen on the mountain are also owed to or dependent on other people and these interrelationships with one another.

[There is a conventional narrative] about … giant changes—from after the nationalist period, when it's seemingly all male, then you get a big change when it becomes more diverse from the 1970s onward. The continuities across this were really quite striking.

WESTAWAY: Yeah, I was really struck by those continuities in relation to the labor hierarchies on the mountain and how imperial labor hierarchies are still present in the region today. My colleague Jo Sharma in her chapter talks about the way in which the British built hill stations in Darjeeling and Kalimpong where these expeditions set off from and they sucked in labor from all around the region, from Nepal, from Sikkim, from Tibet, from Bhutan, and racialized hierarchies of labor developed.

The great anthropologist of the Sherpas, Sherry Ortner, talks about the way in which Sherpas from the Solu-Khumbu experienced modernity through mountaineering. They encountered the world through these expeditions which drew on their labor. The British decided they were really good at carrying heavy loads at high altitudes, and they could become partners in this project. And this was part of an imperial method of co-opting different Indigenous groups to the project of empire. The British did it with the Gurkhas in the military, and they did it with the Sherpas in mountaineering as well.

One of the things I really learned through this project is the ethnic complexity of Nepal is extraordinary. And within the adventure tourism industry, something anthropologists have noted is a lot of these other ethnic groups pass as Sherpas on the mountain [to appeal to clients]. So Western clients want to experience a relationship with a Sherpa, not fully understanding that Sherpa is both a labor category and an ethnic category.

What is your hope for this project?

WESTAWAY: The Everest region [and] the Himalaya as a whole are facing enormous challenges because of climate change. We're seeing huge natural disasters because of these glacial lake outburst floods. [In] the Himalaya, glaciers are the water towers for the Indian subcontinent. If we lose the glaciers there, it's going to mean things become desperate for agricultural communities down in the plains, for instance. So that's a huge challenge everybody is facing.

I suppose when we set the project up, we really wanted to ask whether history can tell us something about the world that's created now on the mountain and whether it enables us to think about doing things differently. We particularly wanted to foreground the Indigenous presence of absolutely essential people on all these expeditions. Not just the high-altitude porters but the mail runners, the interpreters, the people who made the boots, who looked after the animals, and I suppose my vision was always that we wanted to repatriate these stories and give them back to those communities in the region so it would help them address the challenges they're facing today.

And I suppose I also had this dream that

[Photo] **Members of the 1922 British Mt. Everest expedition stop to rest on their way up the mountain. Their summit attempts were unsuccessful.** J.B. Noel, by kind permission of the Royal Geographical Society–Institute of British Geographers

if someone picked this book up in an airport on their way to Kathmandu to go climb Everest, that it would fundamentally reshape their thinking.

PICKMAN: One of my hopes for this book is that it will be part of a larger conversation about re-envisioning histories of exploration and mountaineering writ large. It used to be that all of the biographies of famous explorers, famous climbers—from Mallory and Irvine to people like Whymper and Meade, the alpine pioneers, to polar explorers, white explorers in the Amazon and East Africa—the accounts of these expeditions were either written by themselves or by people who were really just writing hagiographic biographies, and for a long time a lot of scholars ignored histories of exploration because, they said, "It's just white men blundering around, doing imperial things and that's not really interesting, that story is kind of obvious." And in the last few decades there's been a real reappraisal of what these kinds of stories, what these kinds of histories, can tell us, for example, about relationships between human beings and the ways that they see the planet, as well as commercial histories and the ways that industrialization changed the way that people approach the natural world. Also, thinking about different questions of labor and how people assert themselves in expeditionary situations—especially how people who aren't seen to have had agency, people who aren't even mentioned in expedition archives—or just kind of categorized as laborers—how might they exercise their own goals even in a very colonial or very restrictive setting?

HANSEN: One of the points of the book is that there are many stories to be told, and many more remain to be told. I look forward to hearing them and hope that this book stimulates that kind of conversation. Looking beyond the obvious or the traditional, the things we take for granted, but discovering the new worlds—personally, I would say this requires some humility for most of us, and not assuming that everybody thinks about it the same way we do—and if you take that step, then some of these other worlds will be visible where you can take them seriously.

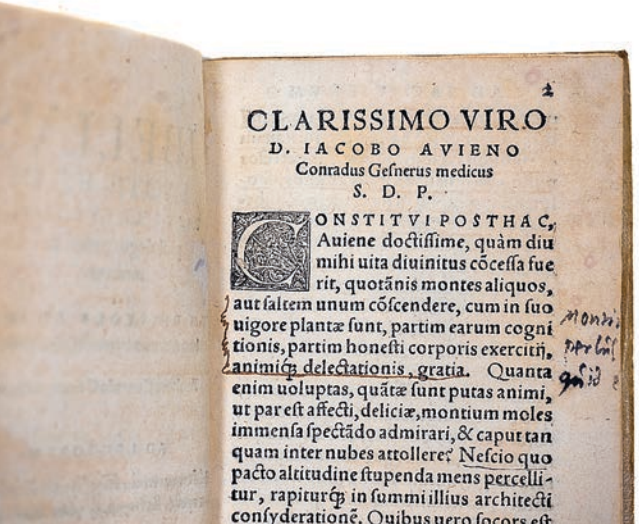
[This interview originally appeared on the Alpinist Podcast in December 2024 and has been lightly edited for length and clarity.—Ed.]

Odds & Ends

On the Admiration of Mountains.

Before technical climbers dared to swing their tools into the icy faces of mountains like Kumbhakarna (Jannu), before, even, they besieged the snowy slopes of Chomolungma (Mt. Everest), there was a time that the very idea of mountains as a place to recreate was a revolutionary thought. Conrad Gesner, a Zurich-based physician, is credited with articulating this novel idea most clearly in a 1541 letter prefacing his pamphlet on the medical benefits of milk, which he believed could only be safely consumed in mountain air. This letter, along with a 1555 essay describing his ascent of Mt. Pilatus in Switzerland, was later printed as *On the Admiration of Mountains.* One of the earliest printings, in the original Latin with a vellum binding, is shelved at the American Alpine Club Library. A forefather to the climbing goal-makers of today, Gesner had personally dedicated himself to climbing at least one mountain a year, partly to study alpine biota, and "partly for the sake of suitable bodily exercise and the delight of the spirit." He waxes eloquent on how pursuing lofty heights brings one closer to the "Supreme Architect," argues that "cold water may be drunk more safely in the mountains" and pontificates on how mountain views, odors and sounds elevate the feeling of being alive. Gesner goes so far as to say: "He is an enemy of nature, whosoever has not deemed lofty mountains to be most worthy of great contemplation." Though, as historian Dawn Hollis has shown, Gesner wasn't the first to admire mountains, he was one of the earliest Europeans to list his admiration as his raison d'être as a mountaineer. HANNAH PROVOST

Photo: Foster Denney


CLARISSIMO VIRO
D. IACOBO AVIENO
Conradus Gesnerus medicus
S. D. P.

CONSTITVI POSTHAC, Auiene doctissime, quàm diu mihi uita diuinitus cõcessa fuerit, quotãnis montes aliquos, aut saltem unum cõscendere, cum in suo uigore plantæ sunt, partim earum cognitionis, partim honesti corporis exercitij, animiq; delectationis, gratia. Quanta enim uoluptas, quãtæ sunt putas animi, ut par est affecti, deliciæ, montium moles immensa spectãdo admirari, & caput tam quam inter nubes attollere? Nescio quo pacto altitudine stupenda mens percellitur, rapiturq; in summi illius architecti consyderationẽ. Quibus uero socors est