Wildest Dreams of Everest and Modern Mountaineering
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WILDEST DREAMS OF EVEREST AND MODERN MOUNTAINEERING

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Abstract: Mount Everest has inspired the «wildest dreams» of mountaineers for more than a century. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, dreams of ascending Mount Everest were viewed as signs of modernity. Everest climbers received Olympic medals in the 1920s and 1980s. Edmund Hillary, Tenzing Norgay, Yuichiro Miura, Junko Tabei, and Reinhold Messner all dreamed of climbing Everest, but their dreams were not the same. More recent Everest controversies might not have surprised climbers from the nineteenth century, who welcomed the development of commercial guides in the Alps. Today, Mount Everest remains a global sporting arena and a more equitable and inclusive sport of modern mountaineering is possible beyond our wildest dreams.

« *Mountain shapes are often fantastic seen through a mist ; these were like the wildest creation of a dream* », George Mallory wrote in 1921 on his first sight of Mount Everest. Amid glimpses of Everest's ridges, glaciers, and mountain forms, « *we were able to piece together the fragments, to interpret the dream… The center had a clear meaning as one mountain's shape, the shape of Everest.* »[1] Mallory's wildest dreams of Everest have been shared by many other climbers, who often envision themselves as modern men entering primitive highlands to disperse the mist and climb the mountains. The opposition of tradition and modernity in the mountains did not begin in the 1920s, nor did it disappear after Mallory and Andrew Irvine's deaths on Everest in 1924. These dreams were evident in Mount Everest's name in the nineteenth century and continue to echo as Mount Everest became and remains a global arena for mountaineering as a modern sport.

Mount Everest has become an archetypal modern space, a territory where mountaineers demonstrate and perform their modernity[2]. The modernity of mountain climbers in the Himalayas is rooted in practices of colonialism and amplified patterns developed in the Alps[3]. Twentieth century Himalayan mountaineering was a « *serious game* » of competing masculinities, in which white, male, Euro-American climbers asserted that they belonged on the mountains[4]. Ascents of Everest inspired by imperialism, nationalism, and individualism have mirrored global sports in the mountains and beyond. Everest became an unofficial Olympic venue with climbing medals being awarded in the 1920s and 1980s. More recently, Everest Base Camp has been hosting an annual mountaineering mega-event with thousands of visitors, worldwide media coverage, high costs, and a large regional and global impact[5]. Debates over ascending Everest in the

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twenty-first century illustrate the continuing ambivalence of the mountain and modernity.

Mount Everest became a modern mountain in the 1850s when East India Company surveyors announced that the peak was highest in the world and asserted their privilege to name it after Col. George Everest, former head of the Indian survey. « *Mount Everest* » cannot be separated from the contingent intersection of imperial politics and precise measurement practices in nineteenth century India[6]. The Great Trigonometrical Survey had already crossed the Indian subcontinent before the surveyors measured the Himalayan peaks from 1848 onwards. While the surveyors asserted that the highest mountain was unknown and unnamed until they measured it, this mountain had multiple local names. Some were recorded on Chinese and European maps more than a century earlier, when Tibetan Buddhist lamas surveyed Tibet in the 1710s and placed Chomolungma on maps published by the Kangxi Emperor in the 1720s and by European cartographers in the 1730s[7].

The name Mount Everest was highly contested in India and Europe, and these were characteristically modern debates. The surveyors who identified the highest point argued that alternate names might refer to a mountain group, but not an individual point, and therefore could not displace the name « *Everest* ». In 1863, Swiss government followed the Indian example and named the highest point of Monte Rosa (and of Switzerland) Dufourspitze after Gen. Guillaume-Henri Dufour, head of the Swiss topographical survey. British mountaineer Douglas Freshfield preferred local names in both places and looked to the Alps as a model for other mountain ranges : « *The Monts Roëses (ice mountains) of earlier centuries have given a name to Monte Rosa. The same thing has happened in the Bernina, the Adamello, the Presanella, and Rosengarten groups within my own memory.* » Monte Rosa was retained as a mountain name even as individual points received separate labels. Freshfield recommended against personal names and imagined the poetry of Byron, Coleridge, and Shelley if they had written about Mont Paccard or Mont Saussure instead of Mont Blanc. A Tennyson poem that renamed Monte Rosa as Dufourspitze was not as sweet sounding. Freshfield regretted that Mount Cook had replaced Aoraki in New Zealand, while Mount Elbrus and Kazbek were substituted for Minghi Tau and Mquinvari in the Caucasus, just as Everest had edged out local names in the Himalayas[8].

European mountaineers looked at Mount Everest in the late nineteenth century and compared the Himalayas of the present with the Alps in the past. In 1883, the first ascent of Kabru, an individual peak in the Kanchenjunga massif, by three Europeans (English lawyer W. W. Graham, Swiss hotelier Emil Boss, and Swiss guide Ulrich Kaufmann) prompted debates over the credibility of local « *Bhooteas* » who doubted they had made the ascent. Freshfield defended the climbers and compared local attitudes in the Himalayas with the Alps fifty years, a hundred years, or three centuries earlier. Freshfield had seen « *some of the boldest hunters of the Caucasus and Tyrol tremble and turn tail* » during mountain ascents and cited similar reports from the Alps and Andes. Alpine peaks that H. B. de Saussure had considered inaccessible in the 1780s « *any child may now reach* ». According to Freshfield, the « *mental attitude* » of Himalayan people « *resembled that of the Swiss peasants of the sixteenth century described by [Josias] Simler* ». They crossed high passes but « *never dreamt of the possibility of reaching Monte Rosa, much less the Matterhorn. The criticism on modern mountaineering of men with these notions must of necessity be wide of the mark.* »[9]

Early proponents of ascending Everest hoped to bolster the British Empire or confirm man's conquest of nature. As Viceroy of India, Lord Curzon encouraged the ascent of Everest or other peaks within British Himalayan territory. Curzon was willing to subsidize the cost of climbing Everest, but Nepal refused entry and diplomatic treaties prohibited access to Tibet.

British forces led by Francis Younghusband invaded Tibet in 1903-1904, which had the unintended effect of prolonging the prohibition on access to Tibet by mountaineers. In 1905, Curzon explained the connection between these mountains and his dreams of national prestige : « *It has always seemed to me a reproach that, with the second highest mountain in the world for the most part in British territory, and with the highest in a neighboring and friendly state, we, the mountaineers and pioneers* par excellence *of the universe, make no sustained and scientific attempt to climb to the top of either of them.* »[10]

After the Great War, Tibet granted permission for British climbers to visit Everest in exchange for military weapons, but Francis Younghusband had more grandiose dreams for the mountain[11]. Mallory and his companions had the idea of climbing Everest, something that Younghusband claimed never occurred to hundreds of millions of people in India : « *even the* idea *of climbing the great peaks never comes into their heads* ». According to Younghusband, the English had followed de Saussure and conquered peaks in the Alps and later in the Himalayas. « *Man was thus steadily marching to dominion over the mountain.* » While airplanes could fly higher than Everest, Younghusband thought airmen sucking oxygen through a tube while a machine carried them upwards proved nothing. Younghusband compared an airplane ascent to a university rowing crew taking a motorboat up the Thames, or a runner hailing a taxicab rather than completing the mile race on foot. Climbing Everest on your own feet was part of the struggle of the human spirit over matter, man over mountain, the feature that made mountaineering a modern sport[12].

After national climbing clubs formed in the nineteenth century, the 1920s marked the emergence of international congresses and organizations including the *Union International des Associations d'Alpinisme* in 1932[13]. The first winter Olympics in Chamonix in 1924 awarded the *Prix Olympique d'alpinisme*, a special gold medal, to eleven British Everest climbers for displaying heroism for all nations by reaching 8500 meters on Mount Everest in 1922. The same Olympic prize was later awarded in 1932 to Franz and Toni Schmid for the first ascent of the north face of the Matterhorn and in 1936 to Hettie and Günter Dyrenfurth for record altitudes in Himalayan climbs. Many mountain films (*Bergfilme*) between the wars combined climbing, skiing, aviation, and high-altitude observatories to represent modernity in the mountains. British airplanes flew over Everest in 1933, a stunt funded by a right-wing Scottish widow sympathetic to British fascists who wanted to impress Indians with British technology. The Swiss pilot Hermann Schreiber received the *Prix Olympique d'aéronautique*, a special aeronautics gold medal, at the 1936 Berlin Olympics for becoming the « first » to cross the Alps in a glider by flying from Thun to Bellinzona a year earlier. Gliding remained a demonstration sport for a few years, but the International Olympic Committee apparently came to agree with Younghusband that mountain sports should rely on human power rather than aeronautical technology[14].

Mallory returned to Everest « *because it's there* » and argued that climbers conquered not an enemy, but themselves. Yet Mallory and Irvine were not by themselves on the mountain. Mallory was leading a group descending Everest when an avalanche killed seven porters in 1922. These porters were belatedly added to the list of those honored by the *Prix Olympique d'alpinisme* when the French Olympic committee granted two additional medals for porters on the expedition. The British climbers awarded one of those medals to Tejbir Bura, a Gurkha officer, and the other medal collectively to the porters who died in the 1922 avalanche. The porters were recognized anonymously and posthumously with this award, and their names were not listed in the Olympic records. The names of the porters killed in 1922 were Thankay Sherpa, Sangay Sherpa, Temba Sherpa, Lhakpa Sherpa, Pasang Namgya Sherpa, Norbu Bhotia, and Pema Sherpa[15].

Mallory's exploits inspired many to make the ascent and more than a few people to search for his body. When Conrad Anker found Mallory's body on Everest in 1999, he recalled that « *it didn't really sink in at first. It was as if everything was in slow motion. Is this a dream ? I wondered. Am I really here ?* »[16] Within a decade, Anker returned to Everest to reenact finding the body, climb in period clothing, and ascend the highest and hardest pitch without a ladder in the feature film *The Wildest Dream* (2011). For a century, Mallory has been the archetypal Everest hero, but a hero of a particular kind. As Julie Rak has noted, Mallory « *represents what could be seen as the apex of modernist white British masculinity and its ideals of brotherhood, persistence, understated heroism, and erotic beauty, its hint of imperialism still in evidence, but without its machismo and violence* »[17].

Climbing in the Himalayas requires intercultural and reciprocal partnerships with local people. Mountains have long been zones of contact and intercultural exchange between mountain communities in Tibet, Nepal, and India, thus shaping how climbers understood their ascents of Everest.

Climbing in the Himalayas requires intercultural and reciprocal partnerships with local people. Mountains have long been zones of contact and intercultural exchange between mountain communities in Tibet, Nepal, and India, thus shaping how climbers understood their ascents of Everest[18]. The orientalism and imperial hubris of some mountaineers made it difficult to acknowledge that their dreams depended on local partners. Some have realized this, though, and they acknowledge this connection in unexpected ways. In 1924, John Noel's documentary film, *The Epic of Everest*, closed with the heroic disappearance of Mallory and Irvine and speculated that supernatural forces had prevented the ascent : « *Could it be, as these mystic peoples say, that this terrible mountain LIVES and is SPIRIT GUARDED ?* » In the 1930s, the Everest expedition leader Hugh Ruttledge met the Head Lama at the Rongbuk monastery near Everest and reflected, « *We do not know everything in the West ; is it possible that we have everything to learn ?* »[19]

Mountain dreams motivated Tenzing Norgay on Everest as a porter in 1935 and as a member of the climbing teams on a Swiss expedition in 1952 and a British expedition in 1953 when he made the first ascent with Edmund Hillary[20]. As a boy, Tenzing had heard about deities on the peak and knew people who had climbed on the other side of Chomolungma. « *What I wanted was to see for myself. This was the dream I have had for as long as I can remember.* » Tenzing was a Sherpa, an ethnic group in the Solu Khumbu region near Everest, and migrated in 1933 from Nepal to India looking for work – a dream for a better future that is as « modern » as those of western climbers. Tenzing's autobiography by a ghost writer in 1955 includes many references to his dreams. Even in a collaborative work, Tenzing's recollection of his dreams on the South Col the night before the final ascent remains distinctive. « *Then I was thinking of Solo Khumbu, my old home, my father and mother. I thought of their faith in God and their prayers for me, and then I myself was praying, to God—and to Everest. After that I was not thinking at all anymore but dreaming. I dreamt of yaks playing about in a pasture, and then of a big white horse. It is a Sherpa belief that to dream of animals is good. And that is what I dreamed of. Somewhere behind the yaks and the horse was another dream. A tall white dream in the sky.* »[21]

Hillary and Tenzing reached the summit together, but their dreams were not the same. After the ascent, the New Zealander Edmund Hillary

recalled his first Himalayan journey in 1951. « *I could see a white fang thrusting up into the sky above the distant hills. What a long way off it was ! So far it still seemed like a dream.* »[22] Hillary returned to the Everest area and partnered with Tenzing in the British team led by Col. John Hunt. On the summit of Mount Everest in 1953, Hillary felt relief and « *a satisfaction less vociferous but more powerful than I had ever felt on a mountain top before* ». He took photos of Tenzing and each of the descending ridges and urinated on the summit. At the same time, Tenzing's first thoughts were happiness and gratitude to God that he had succeeded. Tenzing hugged Hillary, buried offerings in the snow, and then gave a prayer of thanks to the mountain. Tenzing told *Life* magazine shortly after the ascent that he could see in every direction and « *all hills below look like Buddha gods* ». He could see the Rongbuk Monastery in Tibet and the Tengboche monastery in Nepal. « *I think lamas praying there. I put little offering in snow. I feel very good. I have make worship close to Buddha god like think when I am boy.* » As a boy he had climbed ridges for a better view of Chomolungma, which lamas told him was the abode of a god that they worshiped. « *I have feeling for climbing to top and making worship more close to Buddha god. Not same feeling like English Sahibs who say want 'conquer' mountain. I feel more making pilgrimage.* »[23]

Nationalist dreams of conquest continued in large national teams during the 1950s as climbers ascended Annapurna, Everest, Nanga Parbat, K2, Kanchenjunga, and other 8000-meter peaks[24]. The national model persisted in the 1960s and 1970s, with teams climbing Everest from Britain, Switzerland, China, the United States, India, Italy, Japan, and Austria, often with film or television crews and commercial sponsors[25]. Yuichiro Miura became the « *man who skied down Everest* » in 1970 by skiing from the South Col while dragging a parachute to slow his descent which stopped just above a large crevasse. The death of six Sherpas in an icefall collapse earlier in the Japanese expedition is described as a loss to achieve something great. At the end of the Academy award-winning film about this stunt, the narrator reading Miura's diary asks « *was it a dream ? … I am alive.* » As the team walks away under a Japanese flag: « *The end of one thing, the beginning of another. I am a pilgrim again.* »[26]

The counterculture of the 1970s questioned the masculine nationalism of the large expeditions and enabled women and Sherpas to assert that they belonged on Everest, even though they had been climbing in the Himalayas for decades[27]. Junko Tabei from Japan and Pan Duo from China made first ascents of Everest by women in 1975, and Wanda Rutkiewicz from Poland followed in 1978. They overcame significant levels of misogyny and had to break the « *world's highest glass ceiling* » on Everest[28]. As Julie Rak observes, « *a picture of female climbers as those who succeed because they dream big and simply try harder is compelling, but it is not complete, because it depends on a liberal ideology of individual success and heroism that makes gender something that climbers themselves need to climb past* »[29].

Liberal and libertarian ideologies of individualism were amplified in debates over climbing styles, including the use of bottled oxygen. « *My dream* », declared Reinhold Messner in 1978, « *an ascent without facemasks* ». Messner, a German-speaking Italian climber from the South Tyrol, and Peter Habeler, an Austrian climber, were both professional athletes who paid large fees to join a large Austrian climbing team that had a permit to climb Everest. The Austrians brought a hang-glider and Messner was followed by a film crew. After reaching the summit of Everest without bottled oxygen, Messner recorded that his dream was gone and the mountain was a shattered illusion, leaving an empty void. « *A feeling of emptiness sweeps over me, the emptiness is all that is left after my dream of climbing Everest without oxygen has been realized. This hole, this ache, has not yet been replaced by a new dream.* »[30] Messner rejected nationalism as well as technical aids, telling an audience in Bolzano, which had gathered to welcome home a South Tyrolean hero,

« *I am my own homeland* »[31]. Messner returned to Everest two years later to reach the summit alone. Messner had climbed all fourteen 8000-meter peaks without supplemental oxygen by 1986, a feat completed a year later by Jerzy Kukuczka, a Polish climber who made many of these ascents in winter. Both were awarded Olympic silver medals at the Calgary 1988 Olympics, an honor that Messner declined and Kukuczka accepted before he died on Lhotse in 1989[32].

The expansion of climbing guide services on Everest since the 1980s has been criticized in gendered and racist terms that express «white nostalgia» for the time when women and brown men were not on the mountain[33]. Women, Sherpas, and non-traditional climbers (which from the 1980s included corporate executives) asserted that they belonged on Everest. Their presence on the mountain revised earlier masculine discourses and resulted in narratives that Everest was in « *decline* ». These narratives reached a wider public after the deaths of climbers in a storm in 1996 and the discovery of Mallory's body in 1999. Both events circulated quickly on new Internet websites and were depicted in best-selling books, television programs, documentaries, and Hollywood films.

For almost a century, Mount Everest has been a global arena for mountain sports. After the deaths in the storm in 1996, one of the guides, Anatoli Boukreev, wrote that « *mountains are not stadiums where I satisfy my ambition to achieve, they are cathedrals, grand and pure, the houses of my religion* »[34]. This inspiring statement has been widely cited and was no doubt sincere. What is most telling, though, is that Boukreev felt compelled to offer this profession of faith because Mount Everest *has* become such a stadium, with a hybrid audience that is local and global, in person and remote. This is not surprising, as climbers were filmed on Mount Everest in the 1920s, performed on stage in the nineteenth century, and have been closely observed through telescopes while climbing in the Alps since the eighteenth century[35].

Everest's role as an Olympic venue was recently reprised at the intersection of sports, marketing, and technology. Pierre de Coubertin reported that British climbers had promised in 1924 to deposit an Olympic medal on the summit of Everest later that year. In 2012, Kenton Cool, a professional mountain guide from Britain, pledged to take one of the medals awarded to the 1922 Everest team to the summit in advance of the London 2012 Olympics. The previous year Cool had completed the first « *Samsung 3G Challenge* » on Everest by making a 3G phone call from the summit. Climbing clubs and geographical societies that had sponsored the 1920s Everest expeditions endorsed the #OlympicsGamesPledge and so did Samsung. The 2012 climbing season proved treacherous, with deaths on the mountain and the withdrawal of climbers due to unsafe conditions, but Kenton Cool fulfilled the pledge during his tenth ascent of Everest[36].

Many continuities that characterize mountaineering as a modern sport were recognized in the nineteenth century. In 1885, Clinton Thomas Dent evaluated the possibility of climbing Everest, and imagined an alpine Rip van Winkle from his day waking up in the future to find much unaltered. « *The same types of humanity would be around him.* » Dent's elderly hero in knickerbockers and Norfolk jacket would awake after two centuries of slumber to arrive at the center of Chamonix where « *a youth (great-great-great-great-grandson of Jacques Balmat) approaches and waits respectfully by his side, ready to furnish information* ». Flags decorated Chamonix in preparation for « *the tercentenary of the first ascent of Mont Blanc* ». Dent made fun of himself by imagining the « *last of the climbing Englishmen* » returning from the 1000th ascent of the Aiguille du Dru (Dent had made its first ascent a decade earlier). Dent was a surgeon, and his review of human physiology concluded that ascending Everest was possible, although he could not say if it was wise. He died before Mallory and others reached Everest's slopes, but few of the later controversies on the mountain would have

surprised him. Dent's Rip-van-Winkle looked around in the year 2086 and saw thousands of ascents, bitter disputes among climbers, many commercial guides, and realized that he was not so far behind the times – all these things had been common in the Alps in the 1880s. « *If a few of those who follow should take up the more serious side* », Dent wrote, « *and make what has been a pastime into a profession (and why should not some do so ? That which is worth doing at all is worth developing to the utmost possible limit), good will come.* »[37]

Yet Dent's Rip-van-Winkle climber might have been surprised at some of the developments on Everest in the early decades of the twenty-first century. Instant communications were envisioned in the science fiction of his era, but satellite phones, Internet, social media, and real-time weather information have changed how risks are assessed and widened the audience beyond base camp or the readers of climbing journals. The number of climbers has also risen rapidly. Dent envisioned 1000 ascents as a significant threshold, a number surpassed on Everest in around 1998. By 2020, Everest had had more than 10,000 ascents, with Nepalis completing the largest share. Mountain residents and guides are still respectful, but more assertive than the forelock-tugging reincarnations of their great-great-great-great-grandfathers imagined by Dent's gentle satire. By the 2020s, the largest guiding services on Everest are Nepali-owned and their clients are as likely to come from India and China as from Europe and North America. During 2019, Nirmal Purja, a Nepali and former Gurkha and UK special forces officer, completed the ascents of all fourteen 8000-meter peaks in less than seven months[38]. In 2021, he was one of ten Nepali guides who joined forces from separate expeditions to make the first winter ascent of K2. As they neared the top, the Nepali climbers locked arms and stepped onto the summit together. A sign, perhaps, that a more equitable and inclusive sport of modern mountaineering is possible beyond even our wildest dreams.

Biography: Peter H. Hansen is professor of history and director of international and global studies at the Worcester Polytechnic Institute. He is the author of *The Summits of Modern Man: Mountaineering after the Enlightenment* (2013) and is writing a book about commercialization and Mount Everest.

Keywords: mountaineering, Mount Everest, Alps, modernity, Olympic medals.

Résumé: Le mont Everest a inspiré les « rêves les plus fous » des alpinistes depuis plus d'un siècle. Aux XIX^e^ et XX^e^ siècles, les rêves d'ascension du mont Everest étaient considérés comme des signes de modernité. Les grimpeurs de l'Everest ont reçu des médailles olympiques dans les années 1920 et 1980. Edmund Hillary, Tenzing Norgay, Yuichiro Miura, Junko Tabei et Reinhold Messner rêvaient tous de gravir l'Everest, mais leurs rêves n'étaient pas les mêmes. Les controverses plus récentes sur l'Everest n'ont peut-être pas surpris les grimpeurs du XIX^e^ siècle, qui ont salué le développement de guides commerciaux dans les Alpes. Aujourd'hui, le mont Everest reste une arène sportive mondiale et un sport plus équitable et inclusif de l'alpinisme moderne est possible au-delà de nos rêves les plus fous.

Mots-clés: alpinisme, Everest, Alpes, modernité, Prix olympique.

Notes

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