

Mountaineering in the Himalayas

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MOUNTAINEERING in the Himalayas began during the heyday of European empires and continues to be marked by shades of colonialism as well as the shadow of death. Before the late nineteenth century, few people aspired to climb mountains, and colonial officials viewed the Himalayas as blanks on a map, despite the presence of many people who had lived among the mountains for centuries. Many Himalayan peaks were understood to be abodes of deities or spirits. Some Buddhist and Bon pilgrims demonstrated devotion by walking around a mountain or partway up its slopes to make propitiatory offerings, and some later mountaineers view themselves as “pilgrims of a sort.”¹

From a colonial perspective, the Himalayas were unknown territories to be explored. In the 1850s, the Survey of India identified several peaks as among the tallest in the world and named the highest Mount Everest, about the same time that many of the European Alps were climbed for the first time.² Over the next century, climbers had limited access to the Himalayas and limited success reaching its summits. In the first half of the twentieth century, world wars reinforced a military model for mountaineering expeditions, and the deaths of climbers on Everest and Nanga Parbat entwined climbing and nationalism. Large national teams made military-style assaults that succeeded in climbing the world’s fourteen peaks above 8,000 meters in the 1950s and 1960s. Contemporaries described these expeditions as teams of manly “sahibs” attended by multitudes of servants and recognized them as formations of empire.³

During and after the 1970s, mass tourism, trekking, and commercial high-altitude climbing expanded rapidly. Himalayan climbers expressed discomfort with the military style of mountaineering while continuing to embrace colonial discourses that described new climbing routes as forms of exploration. Climbers ascended difficult ridges and faces in large and small groups, and even alone. New climbers included more women and people from formerly underrepresented groups, such as climbers from communities in the Himalayas or recently independent nation-states, but the local labor that made the ascents possible continued to receive little attention. The end of the Cold War coincided with new strategies for economic development, and Himalayan states gave permission to multiple teams each year to climb the highest peaks. Everest remained the height of ambition, especially after eight people died in a single storm in 1996, a disaster narrated in real time over the internet and recounted in popular journalism, best-selling books, and blockbuster films.

As the death toll rose in the twenty-first century, crowding on Everest led some to claim that Himalayan mountaineering had declined from an earlier golden age. Interpretations of Himalayan mountaineering have changed over time. Several books exhibit these shifting perspectives in their titles. Kenneth Mason’s *Abode of Snow: A History of Himalayan Exploration and Mountaineering* (1955) embodied the colonial perspective of mid-century geographers and climbers. *Life and Death on Mt. Everest: Sherpas and Himalayan Mountaineering* (1999), by anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner, viewed mountaineering as a

“serious game” and the encounter of competitive masculinities of Westerners and Sherpas, the ethnic group living at the foot of the mountain in Nepal that has played a critical role in Himalayan ascents. *Fallen Giants: A History of Himalayan Mountaineering from the Age of Empire to the Age of Extremes* (2008), by historians Maurice Isserman and Stewart Weaver, highlighted colonial legacies and identified three eras in Himalayan mountaineering: the age of empire to the 1940s, the golden age in the 1950s and 1960s, and an age of extremes since the 1970s. The exclusionary practices of Himalayan mountaineering and the narrow definitions of who belongs on mountains were critically examined by literary scholar Julie Rak in *False Summit: Gender in Mountaineering Nonfiction* (2021) and by the interdisciplinary contributors to *Other Everests: One Mountain, Many Worlds* (2024).⁴

While chronological divisions are inevitable, master narratives of “decline” are difficult to reconcile with the history of mountaineering in the Himalayas. Mountaineers have been wealthy and inexperienced, entangled with popular media, and dependent on commercial guides and the peoples of the Himalayas since the nineteenth century. Before the first ascent of Mount Everest in 1953, climbers claimed records for reaching successively higher elevations, and they did not know whether it was possible to survive above 8,000 meters (26,247 ft). By the twenty-first century, Himalayan ascents were viewed with more ambivalence than earlier representations of mountaineering as the expression of nationalist pride or man’s conquest of nature. Himalayan mountaineering should be understood not as the exploration of the unknown by outsiders but rather as the recurring coproduction of these mountains by climbers and the peoples of the Himalayas.

Great Games

The Himalayas were mapped by empires from the north and south. In the early eighteenth century, the Kangxi emperor sent surveyors to Tibet, and they placed Jomolangma (with many variations in spelling) on maps published in China in the 1720s and France in the 1730s. A century later, the Great Trigonometrical Survey of India measured the length, breadth, and height of the territories visible from British India. Teams of surveyors, agents, and go-betweens observed the peaks from multiple angles and sent their measurements back to East India Company offices. Radhanath Sikdar (1813–1870) and the staff of the Survey of India corrected the observations for the curvature of the earth and transformed trigonometrical measurements into geographical knowledge. In 1856 the Surveyor-General of India, Andrew Waugh (1810–1878), announced the discovery of the highest mountain in the world and claimed the right to name it after his predecessor, Sir George Everest (1790–1866), since no local name could be known, he claimed, until after the British were allowed into Nepal.⁵

The imperial politics of the “Great Game” between Britain and neighboring empires in the highlands of central Asia, as well as Nepal’s decision to close its borders to almost all foreigners, prevented climbers from attempting to reach many of the highest peaks of the Himalayas even if they had wanted to, which, by and large, they did not. Mid-nineteenth-century naturalists such as the British botanist Joseph Hooker or the Bavarian Schlagintweit brothers ventured among the hills but were more interested in plants, natural history, and geodesy than in reaching the summits. After Edward Whymper made the first ascent of the Matterhorn in the Alps in 1865, he hoped to climb in the Himalayas but was discouraged by authorities in India and instead went to South America in the 1870s–1880s.⁶

Imperial mapping and limited access has obscured the high cost and leading role played by commercial guides in early Himalayan mountaineering. Hungarian climber Maurice de Déchy brought a Swiss guide to the Himalayas in 1879, and the English lawyer W. W. Graham did likewise in 1883, claiming to make the ascent of Kabru (7,412 m/24,318 ft) in

Sikkim, though his claim is sometimes contested. Kenneth Mason believed that Himalayan mountaineering began in 1885 with Francis Younghusband's journey with local guides beyond the borders of Kashmir. Isserman and Weaver date the first mountaineering expedition to William Martin Conway's large climbing team in the Karakoram Himalayas in 1892. Conway had married an American heiress and climbed the Alps, Himalayas, and South America to burnish his reputation as an art historian. Conway's climbing was led by Mattias Zurbriggen, an experienced Italian alpine guide, and the logistics were handled by Lieut. Charles Granville Bruce, who commanded four Gurkha soldiers from Nepal, as well as hundreds of Balti porters who were pressed involuntarily into service. One of the climbers left after arguments with the team, though Conway, Zurbriggen, Bruce, Parbir Thapa, and Harkbir Thapa reached a lower summit of Baltoro Kangri, which they named Pioneer Peak (6,550 m/21,489 ft) and may have been a record elevation at the time.⁷

In 1895 A. F. Mummery went to Nanga Parbat with Bruce and several Gurkha soldiers, but no Swiss guides. Mummery had retired from his family tanning business with enough wealth to devote himself to climbing in the Alps and writing about political economy. Mummery was not able to ascend the Diamir Face of Nanga Parbat, and his team was looking around another side of the mountain when Mummery and two Gurkha orderlies, Ragobir Thapa and Goman Singh, disappeared and were presumed killed by an avalanche.⁸

These deaths did not deter but, rather, inspired others to follow, including Fanny Bullock Workman and William Hunter Workman. This wealthy American couple began climbing in the Alps while bicycling across Europe and repeated the pattern in India, making many ascents in the Himalayas between 1898 and 1912. They hired well-known alpine guides, including Zurbriggen, and even brought Italian porters as intermediaries so they would not have to interact with the hundreds of local porters. In 1906 the Italian guide Cyprien Savoye led Fanny Bullock Workman up Pinnacle Peak (6,930 m/22,735 ft) on Nun Kun, claiming a height record for women that she defended vigorously against competitors and was not surpassed until 1934. On the Siachen glacier in 1912, Fanny Bullock Workman was photographed holding a sign that read "Votes for Women."⁹

Luigi Amedeo di Savoy, Duke of the Abruzzi, had climbed with Mummery in the Alps but was unable to attempt Nanga Parbat after Mummery's death. Instead, the Duke climbed in Alaska, tried to reach the North Pole, and made the first ascent of Ruwenzori in Africa, each expedition on a grand scale with support from the duke's uncle, the king of Italy. In 1909 the Duke of the Abruzzi staged an all-Italian attempt to climb K2, the world's second highest mountain at 8,611 meters/28,251 feet. A previous team of British, Swiss, and Austrian climbers, led by the occultist Aleister Crowley, had tried to climb K2 in 1902, but the ascent ended with dissension among the climbers and desertion by the porters. The Duke of the Abruzzi's 1909 team included a geographer, a doctor, a photographer, seven Italian guides and porters, and an organizer who provided lavish accommodation and hired hundreds of local porters, some of whom accompanied the climbers to the highest camps. The climbers could not surmount the Abruzzi Ridge, named after the duke, and nearly reached the summit of a nearby peak, Chogolisa (7,668 m/25,157 ft), on which they claimed an altitude record not matched until the Everest expedition in 1922.¹⁰

Plans to climb Mount Everest were encouraged by the viceroy of India, Lord Curzon, who considered it a reproach that British climbers had not ascended the highest mountain in the world on the borders of British territory.¹¹ A British military unit returning from Younghusband's invasion of Tibet in 1904 inspected the region near Everest and were encouraged by what they saw. Nevertheless, Nepal and Tibet remained closed to visitors, and mountaineers contented themselves with climbing in the Himalayas of British India,

especially in Garhwal and around Kanchendzonga (known to the British as Kanchenjunga) in Sikkim. In 1907 British climbers Arnold Mumm and Tom Longstaff went to Garhwal with three alpine guides, Bruce, and nine Gurkhas. Mumm, a scion of the Jules Mumm champagne fortune, experimented with using supplemental oxygen. Longstaff, Alexis Bocherel, Henri Bocherel, and Karbir Burathoki made the first ascent of Trisul (7,120 m/23,360 ft). Two Norwegian climbers, Carl Wilhelm Rubenson and Ingvald Monrad-Aas, nearly ascended Kabru in 1907, despite having started climbing only the year before, and returned singing the praises of the Sherpa porters whom they had hired in Darjeeling.

Sherpas are an ethnic group in the Solu-Khumbu region of Nepal, where pastoral agriculture and trans-Himalayan trade provided insufficient economic opportunities, which led some to migrate to Darjeeling, a dynamic hill station in Sikkim. The Scottish scientist Alexander Kellas followed Rubenson and Monrad-Aas's advice and hired Sherpas as porters and climbing companions when he traveled in Sikkim from 1907 to 1912. Kellas made multiple ascents with Sherpas of Langpo Peak (6,954 m/22,814 ft)—with an unnamed Sherpa in 1909, with Sonam and Tuny in 1911, and with Nema and Anderkyow in 1912. Early mountaineering expeditions hired porters from among the many ethnic groups in Darjeeling. Yet, so many Sherpas joined climbing expeditions to Everest and other peaks over the next three decades that the Sherpa name became synonymous with the role of Himalayan mountaineering porter. For many years, though, contributions of Sherpas and other groups received less attention in historical accounts about mountaineering.¹²

British climbers received permission to visit Mount Everest from Tibet in exchange for British weapons in 1920. The Tibetan army had become dependent on British weapons during a period of military conflicts, and access to the mountain became a bargaining chip in Anglo-Tibetan diplomacy. In Britain, Francis Younghusband lobbied for the ascent to elevate the human spirit and demonstrate man's mastery over nature. The 1921 British Everest team was organized as a military reconnaissance, with a military officer in command, surveyors who mapped, a geologist who collected specimens, and climbers who looked for a route to the top.

In 1922 a large British team led by General C. G. Bruce returned to Everest, and George Mallory and others reached record elevations above the North Col during a military siege-style expedition. The expedition ended in tragedy when seven porters, most of them ethnic Sherpas, were killed in an avalanche. At the 1924 winter Olympics in Chamonix, the Prix olympique d'alpinisme was given to thirteen British members of the 1922 Everest team and later awarded to Tejbir Bura, a Gurkha officer, who is usually considered the first Olympic medalist from Nepal, and collectively to the porters who had died in the avalanche.

Cinematic Mountains of Destiny

The British expedition to Mount Everest in 1924 was bankrolled by a film company created by John Noel, an ex-military officer who had also filmed the Everest team in 1922. Several climbers again reached record heights. George Mallory and Andrew Irvine were using supplemental oxygen when they were last seen going strong for the summit before disappearing into the clouds in 1924. Their deaths led to celebrations of heroism and extended speculation about their fate. The discovery of Mallory's body in 1999 and Irvine's remains in 2024 did not settle the question, did they reach the top? Though speculation continues, some climbers with experience on Everest consider it unlikely that they reached the summit, and it remains unproven. Noel closed the expedition film, *The Epic of Everest* (1924), by asking whether the deaths of Mallory and Irvine were caused by the guardian spirits of Chomolungma, Goddess

Mother of the World. While the film popularized this Tibetan name for the mountain, scenes in the film and the London performances of a group of “dancing lamas” offended Tibetan authorities, chilled Anglo-Tibetan relations, and resulted in the cancellation of further attempts to climb Everest for almost a decade.¹³

Though Everest climbers left the motion-picture cameras behind, filmmakers joined the teams on other peaks in the 1930s. In 1931 Frank Smythe was his own cameraman in a small party that he led to the top of Kamet (7,756 m/25,446 ft) in Garhwal, pushing Sherpa Lewa ahead to be first on the summit, as shown in the film *Kamet Conquered* (1932). In 1933 British airplane pilots filmed themselves flying over the summit of Everest in biplanes, a stunt sponsored by a right-wing Scottish widow who said in the film *Wings Over Everest* (1934) that she wanted to impress the natives of India with Britain’s technology and will to rule.¹⁴ In 1934 Günther Dyhrenfurth, a German-Swiss geologist, led an international team that included his wife and was sponsored by a commercial film company to the top of Sia Kangri (7,422 m/24,370 ft) in the Karakorum. Filmmakers recorded climbers and actors on-location for *Der Dämon des Himalayas* (1935), a film featuring a mountain spirit that kills climbers during the ascent before the protagonist’s will triumphs to reach the top.¹⁵ In 1936 Günter and Hettie Dyrenfurth received the Prix olympique d’alpinisme at the Berlin Olympic Games for their Himalayan ascents, including her height record for women.

Filmmakers also joined German climbers on Nanga Parbat in the 1930s, and repeated attempts and numerous deaths transformed Nanga Parbat into Germany’s *Schicksalberg*, mountain of destiny. German climbing teams in the Himalayas received state funding after the Nazi party came to power. The Reichsportsführer, Hans von Tschammer und Osten, viewed Himalayan ascents as the embodiment of man’s will to conquer the material world. In 1934 a deadly storm on Nanga Parbat killed four Germans and six Sherpa porters, and in 1937 another seven Germans and nine Sherpas died in avalanches and storms on Nanga Parbat. Tales of heroism by the Sherpa porters on these and other expeditions circulated widely in the Himalayas. Both Tenzing Norgay and Ang Tharkay later recalled in autobiographies in the 1950s that reports from Sherpas returning from Everest and Nanga Parbat had inspired them to join climbing teams in the 1930s.¹⁶

The military style of Himalayan mountaineering always existed alongside smaller expeditions. Isserman and Weaver, Wade Davis, and Deborah Baker convincingly argue that European mountaineering in the 1920s and 1930s was fundamentally shaped by the experience and memories of the First World War.¹⁷ Everest for the British and Nanga Parbat for the Germans revived the spirit of the Great War and became summits of redemption and destiny, whether by large or small teams. On Everest, large expeditions led by military officers alternated with smaller-scale efforts led by Eric Shipton or Bill Tilman, former colonial planters in East Africa. In 1936 Tilman led a British-American team in the ascent of Nanda Devi (7,816 m/25,643 ft), but attempts on Everest failed to reach the summit. Solo climbers even made mad dashes to Everest, with Englishman Maurice Wilson dying on Everest in 1934 and Canadian Earl Denman trying unsuccessfully with several Sherpa porters, including Tenzing Norgay, in 1947.

Critiques of nationalist and militarist approaches to Himalayan mountaineering came from outside as well as inside climbing circles. The fictional protagonist of W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood’s play *The Ascent of F6* (1936) reluctantly accepts a messianic mission to race German climbers to be first on top of F6, a peak on the border of British and German colonial territory said to be haunted by demons. The climber sacrifices his companions before confronting his inner demons and dying on the summit, a personal failure but public hero for the empire.¹⁸

Nationalisms and Empires

After the Second World War, the political context of Himalayan mountaineering changed with the independence of India and Chinese occupation of Tibet. Nepal opened its borders in 1950 to a few foreign visitors and the approach route to Everest shifted from the north in Tibet to the south in Nepal. In 1950 the French climbers Maurice Herzog and Louis Lachenal made the first ascent of Annapurna (8,091 m/26,545 ft), the first 8,000-meter peak to be climbed. Herzog suffered severe frostbite that required amputations. Herzog's account of the harrowing descent and his prior experience in the French Resistance during the war resulted in a rapturous welcome in Paris. Herzog's *Annapurna* (1950) concluded with a call to find "other Annapurnas in the lives of men." Ang Tharkay, the Sirdar, or leader of the porters, turned back before the summit but was warmly welcomed in France and his autobiography was published in Paris.¹⁹

On Everest, British climbers made a reconnaissance of the Nepal side of Everest in 1951, but their leader, Eric Shipton, hesitated to put the lives of Sherpas at risk in the Khumbu Icefall. The politics of permission for Everest also changed, and Nepal gave a Swiss team permission to climb Everest in 1952. The Swiss included many alpine guides, and Tenzing Norgay was Sirdar and a full member of the climbing team. Tenzing and the Swiss guide Raymond Lambert reached a record height about 800 feet below the summit.²⁰

On May 29, 1953, New Zealander Edmund Hillary (1919–2008) and Sherpa Tenzing Norgay (1914–1986) reached the summit of Everest in a British team led by Colonel John Hunt. On the summit, Tenzing held aloft an ice-axe with the flags of Britain, Nepal, India, and the United Nations. Each of the nation-states represented by these flags claimed the ascent as their own. Tenzing was born near Everest and lived in the Khumbu region of Nepal before migrating to Darjeeling, where he lived for the rest of his life. Ensuing controversies concerned who was on top first on the summit, honors for the climbers, and Tenzing's nationality. Hillary and Tenzing said they reached the top "almost together," and neither could have made it to the top without the other. Newly independent nation-states asked Tenzing to choose a singular nationality, and he accepted Jawaharlal Nehru's offer to become a leader of the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute in Darjeeling, where Nehru hoped he would "make a thousand Tenzings."²¹

These climbs became the model for ascents of other 8,000-meter peaks. On Nanga Parbat in 1953, Hermann Buhl reached the summit alone in an Austrian-German expedition. K2 was climbed by a massive Italian team in 1954. The Swiss climbed Everest and Lhotse (8,516 m/27,940 ft), an adjacent peak and the world's fourth highest, in 1956. The Chinese climbed Everest from the north in 1960 and left a bust of Mao Zedong on the summit. In 1963 the Americans climbed two routes on Everest: Jim Whittaker and Nawang Gombu climbed the Southeast Ridge, and Tom Hornbein and Willi Unsoeld ascended the West Ridge and traversed the summit by descending in the tracks of their predecessors. Everest was summited by multiple climbers from India in 1965 and from Japan in 1970. Shishapangma (8,027 m/26,335 ft), the last of the 8,000-meter peaks to be climbed, was surmounted by Chinese and Tibetan climbers in 1964. Nawang Gombu (1936–2011), a Sherpa living in Darjeeling, became the first person to summit Everest twice after reaching the top with the Americans in 1963 and Indians in 1965.²²

Geopolitical concerns and military conflicts directly influenced mountaineering in the Himalayas. Border disputes between India and China in 1962 and India and Pakistan in 1965 broke into hostilities and the posting of troops at high altitudes. Thousands of Indian and Pakistani soldiers have remained in a stalemate on the Siachen glacier, and since the

1980s more troops have died from avalanches or exposure than from military fighting. In 1965 a CIA-funded team of American climbers left an atomic-powered listening device high on Nanda Devi to monitor Chinese weapons testing. When Indian climbers returned a year later, the device was gone, apparently swept away by an avalanche, and its radioactive materials have never been found. A similar, nuclear-powered listening device was planted on Nanda Kot.²³

The Second World War also shaped climbing during the Cold War in multiple ways. Climbers used oxygen apparatuses developed for high-altitude pilots during the war, and the application to mountaineering of military research, logistics, and equipment were significant peace dividends from wartime investments. Military-funded research into high-altitude physiology by the British scientist Griffith Pugh and others in the 1940s–1950s contributed to the climbers' success on 8,000-meter summits. Culturally, the planting of the US flag on Everest in 1963 reminded American climbers of the World War II flag-raising on Iwo Jima. The "brotherhood of the rope" in Himalayan mountaineering in the 1950s and 1960s was modeled on the brotherhood of the battlefield and fostered a shared masculinity and esprit de corps among men during this period, even as it excluded women and obscured the contribution of Sherpas and other people in the Himalayas.²⁴

Most public celebrations of Himalayan ascents focused on the resourcefulness of the nation's (male) climbers and the loyalty of local labor and reached wider audiences in best-selling books and popular performances and films.²⁵ Several all-women's teams of European and American climbers tried climbing in Nepal in the 1950s, including an attempt on Cho Oyu in 1959. That year, the national mountaineering team in China selected Pan Duo, a Tibetan woman, from a farm near Lhasa for training as a female climber. Pan Duo joined the men's national team to climb Muztagh Ata (7,546 m) in 1959 and Gongger Jiubie Peak (7,595 m) in 1961, both claiming record elevations for women.²⁶ She was a member of the 1960 Chinese Everest team but not allowed to climb to the highest camps.

Gender and Masculinity

By the 1960s–1970s, hippie tourists and climbers flocked to Nepal for the lax attitude toward drugs and easy access to mountains.²⁷ While some climbers embraced a countercultural stance and criticized large, national climbing teams, they did not question the colonial logic of mountaineering as exploration and turned their attention to unclimbed faces and ridges. In 1970 British climbers Dougal Haston and Don Whillans reached the summit of Annapurna South Face in a team led by Chris Bonington. For climbers like Reinhold Messner, to trace a new line on a mountain was to achieve a form of immortality. In 1970 Messner and his brother ascended the Rupal Face of Nanga Parbat and were descending the Diamir Face when Günther Messner disappeared. For decades, recriminations over these events led to disputes and lawsuits, until fragments of Günther's bones resurfaced in 2005 and DNA tests confirmed Reinhold Messner's account, which he recreated in a 2010 film, that his brother had disappeared in an avalanche.²⁸

On Everest, climbers from national and international teams put the Southwest Face under siege for several years before a team of British climbers topped out in 1975, in an expedition with logistical support from thirty-eight Sherpa porters and financial support from multiple British corporations, following a well-established model.²⁹ Also in 1975, Junko Tabei (1939–2016), a Japanese woman, made the first female ascent of Everest with Ang Tsering. Two weeks later Pan Duo (1939–2014), the Tibetan woman whose name is sometimes transliterated Phantog, climbed Jomolangma/Everest in a Chinese team fifteen years after her first expedition to the mountain.

Female mountaineers experienced so much sexism from men that some turned to all-women climbing teams. In 1978 Arlene Blum led an all-women's expedition to Annapurna and raised funds by selling shirts with the slogan "a woman's place is on top." Two American women, Vera Komarkova and Irene Beardsley Miller, and two Sherpas, Chewang Ringjing and Mingma Tsering, reached Annapurna's summit for the first female ascent. The women's team on Annapurna faced criticism (not directed at male climbers) for employing male Sherpas, and two women died in a later attempt to climb the peak without men. Sherry Ortner noted the role of reforms in Sherpa Buddhism and the Western counterculture in giving Sherpas and women a more prominent place in Himalayan mountaineering. Julie Rak's study of Annapurna, K2, and Everest highlights the gendered implications of a "brotherhood of the rope" and the importance in mountaineering of mastery of the self, others, and environment in ways that exclude women and nontraditional climbers in debates over who is an authentic climber, belongs on the mountain, or embodies proper climbing style.³⁰

The counterculture influenced Reinhold Messner and other advocates of "alpine style" climbing, with a preference for smaller teams and antipathy for aids such as bottled oxygen. Messner, a German-speaking Italian from the South Tyrol, and Peter Habeler, an Austrian, climbed Hidden Peak together without supplemental oxygen in 1975. They paid fees to join an Austrian expedition to Everest in 1978. The Austrians brought hang gliders and Messner a film crew, and Messner had altercations with Sherpas. Messner and Habeler made the first ascent of Everest without bottled oxygen on May 8, 1978. Messner returned to Nanga Parbat later that summer to climb the Diamir Face alone, and in 1980 he went to Tibet to ascend Everest alone and without supplemental oxygen. Everest was climbed in the winter by Polish climbers in 1980.³¹

From the mid-1980s, many climbers set out to claim Everest as a lustrous pearl in a string of prominent peaks. In 1985 Dick Bass, an oil and ski resort executive, became the first person to climb the "Seven Summits," the highest points on each of the seven continents, making most ascents with Frank Wells, a Walt Disney executive, all climbed with commercial guides. Junko Tabei became the first woman to climb the Seven Summits in 1992. Messner climbed all fourteen of the world's 8,000-meter peaks without supplemental oxygen between 1970 and 1986, earning a substantial fortune as a professional mountaineer from endorsements, writing, and lecturing.

Such financial rewards were not available to Junko Tabei or other successful female climbers, some of whom paid with their lives and faced criticism not directed at men. Wanda Rutkiewicz (1943–1992), a Polish climber, hoped to promote women's liberation by climbing Everest in 1978, the first female ascent of K2 in 1986, and ascents of many other 8,000-meter peaks before disappearing on Kanchendzonga in 1992. Pasang Lhamu Sherpa (1961–1993) became the first Nepali woman to climb Everest in 1993 and died during the descent. In 1995 British mountaineer Allison Hargreaves (1962–1995) climbed Everest and died months later descending from the top of K2, which prompted posthumous criticism for being a climber and a mother. Hargreaves diaries revealed that she was torn between "wanting the children and wanting K2" and hoped to earn enough money from her climbing feats that summer to leave her husband.³²

By 2010 three female professional mountaineers completed ascents of all fourteen "8,000ers." The disputed laurels went to Edurne Pasabán, a Basque-Spanish climber, or Oh Eun-Sun, a South Korean. Oh's ascent of Kanchendzonga the previous year was disputed because she took a summit photo in a snowstorm 50 meters below the highest point. During the 1955 first ascent of Kanchendzonga (8,586 m/28,169 ft, the world's third highest peak), the team of British climbers also stopped below the summit in deference to religious beliefs in Sikkim, though the efficacy of their restraint is debatable since they came quite close to the

top. The Austrian mountaineer Gerlinde Kaltenbrunner became the first woman to climb all fourteen 8,000ers without supplemental oxygen in 2011.³³

Thin Air, Thick Crowds

Disputes about climbing priority (who was first?) or climbing style (how was it climbed?) are endemic in mountaineering. Debates over the use of supplemental oxygen have taken place since the earliest Everest expeditions in the 1920s. In the absence of official record-keeping, journalists or enthusiasts have become self-appointed substitutes. From the 1960s until the 2010s, Elizabeth Hawley, an American journalist resident in Kathmandu, served as an arbiter of Himalayan ascents, interviewing climbers and evaluating their credibility. Annual statistics based on her methods of data collection are maintained in the *Himalayan Database*.³⁴

Guiding services expanded after Nepal allowed multiple climbing teams on Everest at the same time in the 1980s. Debates over commercial guides on Everest accelerated after multiple deaths on Everest in 1996, with eight deaths in a storm and fifteen over the year. The climbing journalist Jon Krakauer's best-selling *Into Thin Air* (1997) blamed the tragedy on commercial guides competing for clients and on inexperienced climbers who did not serve an apprenticeship in climbing or share in the "brotherhood of the rope" from days of yore. The death toll was lower than it might have been because many climbers assisted with rescues, while a few others refused to give any aid. News of the disaster and of conflicts within and between climbing teams circulated quickly on new websites in 1996. Krakauer sold millions of copies, and other climbers added their perspectives in dozens of later books. The disaster was recounted in a television show, IMAX film, documentaries, and a Hollywood dramatization called *Everest* (2015).

Crowded slopes have fostered debates over frayed ties among climbers, trash left behind, and the ethics of high-altitude risks and rescues. In 2006, on the north side of Everest, British climber David Sharp lay dying high on the mountain while other climbers went past him to the summit; weeks later an Australian climber, Lincoln Hall, was rescued after collapsing in a similar position. Difficulties of elevation, terrain, and risk of death for rescuers create unique ethical dilemmas on Everest and K2.³⁵ Debates about rescues on Everest were filmed by reality-television shows embedded on climbing teams and documented by journalists.

Once again, death and disaster did not deter but inspired others to climb Himalayan peaks. The number of climbers has grown steadily. From 1953 to 1966 the cumulative total for ten expeditions across all Everest routes (north and south) was 571 people above Base Camp, twenty-four reaching the summit, and five deaths. Sixty years later, in spring 2013, the eighty-eight expeditions across Everest included 1,018 people above Base Camp, 665 that reached the summit, and eight deaths.³⁶ The areas with the largest increase in climbing activity are concentrated in the areas around Ama Dablam, Cho Oyu, and Everest and a few "trekking peaks" between 6,000 and 7,000 meters in elevation, mostly in the Khumbu region of Nepal.

Conflicts and Control

The risks encountered by porters, guides, and high-altitude workers on the highest peaks are substantial. The reward of high pay during the short climbing season provides financial incentives to become a high-altitude guide. By some estimates, the role of high-altitude porter on Mount Everest has among the highest fatality rates for any profession in the world. Deaths of climbers or high-altitude workers leave surviving family members financially and emotionally bereft, and Western climbers ask whether they are treating Sherpas as "disposable."³⁷ High levels of risk combined with a lack of respect for the people who fix ropes and

act as guides has led to open conflicts. In 2013 several Western climbers insulted Sherpas who were placing fixed ropes for climbing teams, which led to fighting words and physical violence at a high-altitude climbing camp.

In the early twenty-first century, Nepalis have asserted greater control over climbing on Everest. The government of Nepal has undergone tumultuous political transitions and provides little regulation but earns substantial income from climbing permits. The number of Nepali-owned commercial guiding companies on Everest is increasing steadily. This has not reduced the exposure to risk, as high-altitude porters repeatedly ascend the Khumbu Icefall, one of the mountain's most dangerous sections above Everest Base Camp in Nepal. In 2014 an avalanche in the icefall killed sixteen high-altitude workers, most of them ethnic Sherpas. The documentary *Sherpa: Trouble on Everest* (2015) vividly shows the recovery of bodies, grief of Sherpa families, and protests and demands by Nepali high-altitude workers that canceled the climbing season.³⁸ The Nepal earthquake of 2015 killed about nine thousand people in Nepal, with about twenty deaths in Base Camp, and the disproportionate media attention to events near Everest is a legacy of this longer history.

By the 2020s Nepali guiding companies have more clients on Everest than the foreign outfitters, the reverse of earlier patterns. The pressure to continue climbing in challenging conditions is strong. The coronavirus brought climbing to a halt in 2020, but its resumption in 2021 before the pandemic was over demonstrated the deadly trade-off that recurs each year. After decades of tragedies, risks remain and climbing continues, with hundreds reaching the summit annually. More than half the ascents of Everest in recent years are by Nepali high-altitude workers and guides, with climbers from India and China outnumbering climbers from other countries.

It would be impossible to provide a balance sheet weighing the costs of deaths against the benefits of the mountaineering industry to the region. Trekking routes to the peaks have created paths to prosperity in some Himalayan communities, especially near Everest and Annapurna, and, to a lesser extent, in the trekking and climbing areas of India and Pakistan. The infrastructure for trekking and climbing, which includes lodges, tea houses, gift shops, porters, guides, cooks, and all the paraphernalia of tourism, has been supplemented with development projects that otherwise might not have been built, such as schools, hospitals, airstrips, roads, hydroelectric facilities, or rebuilt temples. Mountaineering is a form of tourism that provides employment for many people in the Himalayas. Though few incur the same risks as high-altitude workers, many people in mountain communities know someone who has died or been injured working on climbing expeditions.³⁹

Continuities and Change

In longer perspective, the conditions in the so-called golden age of Himalayan mountaineering—when empire, war, nationalism, and the conquest of nature created a white masculinity of exploratory mountaineering that justified risks, excluded women, and overlooked contributions by Sherpas—could not be sustained and nostalgia for that era would be misplaced. More recently, postcolonial discomfort with the nationalism, imperialism, and militarism has led some Western climbers to think that if they just avoid large, siege-style commercial expeditions commanded by ex-military officers using supplemental oxygen on the most crowded ropes, then their climbing will be virtuous and unproblematic. To be sure, risk is unevenly distributed on popular climbing routes where high-altitude workers fix ropes, set camps, and accompany climbers. Yet even the small-scale, “alpine-style” teams cannot avoid the ethical dilemmas inherent in climbing in one of the least developed regions of the world.

In this context, mountaineering in the Himalayas can create uncomfortable continuities with dubious traditions in the past. Climbing new routes reproduces the colonial fantasy that mountaineering is exploration without exploitation. Alpine-style expeditions that refuse to hire local porters and insist on going wherever they want in the name of the “freedom of the hills” leave local communities impoverished and reinforce the gap between the Global North and South. Climbing a mountain “on its own terms” (i.e., without supplemental oxygen or in a small team) breathes new life into an outmoded colonial machismo that should have been retired long ago, the battle of man versus nature. Melting glaciers have become symbols of climate change in the Himalaya, in part due to the attention devoted to climbing Everest and other Himalayan peaks. Yet climbers and NGOs need continually to be reminded that the agency of Sherpas and others in Himalayan communities make possible not only these ascents but also sustainable adaptations to a changing climate in mountain regions.⁴⁰

Throughout its history, mountaineering has been a collaborative endeavor, with the peoples of the Himalayas playing a critical role that has become more prominent and visible. Several Sherpas have climbed Everest more than twenty times, yet some receive less recognition than the clients whom they accompany to the top. In 2019 Nirmal Purja, a Nepali of Magar descent and former Gurkha and UK Special Forces officer, launched the crowdfunded “Project Possible” to climb all fourteen 8,000-meter summits in record time, an effort completed in less than seven months. In 2020 China and Nepal collaborated to resurvey the height of Everest/Chomolungma/Sagarmatha at 8,848.86 meters (29,031.7 ft). On January 16, 2021, a group of ten Nepali climbers combined their efforts from three separate mountaineering teams to make the first winter ascent of K2, the last 8,000-meter summit to be climbed in winter. Just below the top of K2, the ten Nepalis linked arms, sang the Nepali national anthem, and stepped onto the summit together.⁴¹

Mountaineering has long been contentious, confrontational, and commercial, with deep roots in the local and global politics of its time. Despite their allure as the highest mountains in the world, Himalayan summits cannot offer an Olympian position above or apart from the controversies of the past or the dilemmas of the present. Even if climbers avoid the most heavily trafficked slopes of Mount Everest, there is no escaping the worldly connections of mountaineering and modernity in the Himalayas.

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