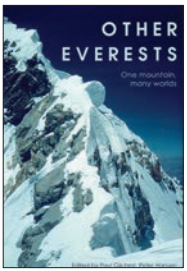
BOOK REVIEWS

Edited by David Stevenson

MOUNTAINS BEFORE MOUNTAINEERING: THE CALL OF THE PEAKS BEFORE THE MODERN AGE
By Dawn L. Hollis (The History Press)



OTHER EVERESTS: ONE MOUNTAIN, MANY WORLDS
Edited by Paul Gilchrist, Peter Hansen, and Jonathan Westaway (Manchester University Press)

Ghosts haunt the pages of mountaineering history: names of the innumerable dead recounted in litanies of loss; blank spaces between the lines, recalling those forgotten, silenced, or erased. And there are also what historian Daniel Lord Smail refers to as ghost theories: "old ideas that continue to structure our thinking without our being fully aware of their controlling presence." In *Mountains before Mountaineering*, Dawn Hollis describes how Smail's concept applies to her research on early European climbing history: "It seems to capture exactly what I keep coming up against: an idea so old and so oft-repeated that it has taken on the status of fact, its real origins long forgotten."

For Hollis, that mistaken "fact" is the myth that almost no one perceived the beauty of the Alps, let alone enjoyed climbing them, until the arrival of the Romantics and British mountain tourists. Her book—along with *Other Everests: One Mountain, Many Worlds*, edited by Paul Gilchrist, Peter Hansen, and Jonathan Westaway—is part of a growing effort to uncover errors in past histories and to reveal how these distorted narratives impact views of mountaineering today. Read together, the books trace the arc of a particular delusory vision that began in the Alps and spread across the mountain world.

For decades, best-selling authors and respected scholars have quoted 17th-century European descriptions of the Alps as "boils" and "warts," evoking images of perplexing ugliness and fear. "This is a compelling vision," Hollis acknowledges in *Mountains before Mountaineering*. "It is fascinatingly strange to imagine a time when the overall view of mountains was so at odds with that of today, and deliciously tempting to cast ourselves as having a special relationship with mountains, unknown by our ancestors.... It is also...*wrong*."

As Hollis deftly proves, the myth leaves out accounts of pre-18th-century alpine adventurers longing to prove themselves or to encounter marvels, naturalists delighting in mountain wildflowers, religious seekers hoping to get closer to the heavens, and scholars insisting that peaks were God's ornaments on Earth. Most of all, the myth neglects the experiences of people who lived among the Alps: guides who led travelers over snowy passes, hunters who chased chamois from ledge to ledge, and herders—mostly women—who led cattle to high pastures. It was local people, Hollis shows, who started to develop many fundamental practices of mountaineering, from early crampon use to glacier travel and crevasse rescue.

For a long time, *mountaineer* meant someone who dwelled in the mountains. As Victorian climbers adapted the word's significance to describe only their identity,

they emphasized their status as heroes of mountain tales above the "porters" and "guides" who enabled their ascents, as well as other villagers who'd explored the heights before them. By claiming to have invented mountain climbing, the Victorians propagated additional myths that haunt us: a belief that a love of peaks can be cultivated best by "modern" elites, rather than shared by people from all backgrounds; an assertion that outsiders can know mountains better than local residents might; and an insistence that a "true mountaineer" climbs for "purely" recreational motives, discounting the rich variety of reasons that people have climbed and continue to do so today.

One ghost theory thus propagated others that spread beyond the Alps, restricting ideas about what kinds of protagonists count as "real" climbers and whose mountain stories matter.

The editors of *Other Everests* likewise begin with images of ghosts, evoking the invisible creators of footprints on the world's highest peak. Since the early 20th century, as they note, many casual readers of classic Western mountaineering tales would have assumed such tracks usually belonged to white men on their way to complete a grandiose, heroic ascent. Yet in the 16 essays of this volume, some of the best international mountaineering scholars demonstrate that the phantoms of Everest aren't always the ones we're conditioned to expect.

Sifting through archives and oral histories, the *Other Everests* writers uncover figures frequently absent from dominant accounts, as if buried under windswept drifts of snow. The "fleeting detail" of a monk folding a white *khata* ceremonial scarf in John Noel's 1922 Everest film hints at the missing scene of the avalanche deaths of seven local staff. Images of female expedition workers and mountaineers re-emerge from lesser-heard stories and old photos—such as the faded picture of a Sherpa woman bent under one of the heavy loads of the 1953 Everest expedition.

Turning to the present day, contributors describe how Sherpa outfitters, guides, and mountaineers have started to reclaim their side of Everest as a "Nepali mountain," while inequalities persist. Through access to social media and modern communications technologies, Sherpas have found wider audiences for counternarratives that disrupt stereotypical tales and restore their own voices. And as scholar Ruth Gamble recounts, the vision of Chomolungma (the mountain's Sherpa name) as a sacred summit has persisted—beneath the widespread image of a commodified "Mt. Everest."

The collection of essays evokes, as the editors hope, "a plurality of perspectives, a world of multiple or alternative" peaks—an abundance of once seemingly invisible mountains crystallizing into overlapping, radiant forms. Yet as our climate crisis accelerates, the topographies of all these "Other Everests" are at risk of loss once more. Countless writers in the past have described high peaks as "sublime." Today, contributor Yvonne Reddick observes, the snows of the South Col themselves are *sublimating*, vanishing into thin air.

When I first heard Hollis present her research at the 2015 Thinking Mountains conference, historian Maurice Isserman congratulated her: "Now, we need to rewrite all our books." That same year, I asked the anthropologist Pasang Yangjee Sherpa how she thought mountaineering literature should evolve. Her response, quoted again in *Other Everests*, now resonates even more deeply: "The story should be about the existence of multiple stories and about bringing them to light.... It should involve shifting our focus from one-way-of-being to recognizing the multiple-ways-of-being."

A decade later, *Mountains before Mountaineering* and *Other Everests* have joined a swell of books creating new bodies of mountain literature beyond the limits of the old canon, from the award-winning histories by Bernadette

McDonald, Nandini Purandare, and Deepa Balsavar, which restore stories of Pakistani and Sherpa expedition staff, to genre-pushing works such as Elizabeth Bradfield, CMarie Fuhrman, and Derek Sheffield's *Cascadia Field Guide*, which elevates plants and animals as worthy heroes of alpine tales.

Amid rising ecological disasters, both *Mountains before Mountaineering* and *Other Everests* suggest, we need to break free of the "ghost theories" that merely promoted accounts of summit conquests by a privileged few—and to expand the boundaries of our empathy until we recognize the stories of all people and all living things in the mountains, including the land itself. As a Ladakhi woman, Dolma, told anthropologist Karine Gagné (cited in *Other Everests*): "To care for the glacier, you have to see the glacier, you have to know the glacier, like you know a friend."

—Katie Ives (*adapted in part from the author's articles in Alpinist issues 88 and 73*)

TOBIN, THE STONEMASTERS, AND ME, 1970–1980: REMEMBERING TOBIN SORENSON, THE BEST CLIMBER IN THE WORLD
By Rick Accomazzo
(Stonemaster Books)

Much the way nature abhors a vacuum, historians seem to hate unlabeled epochs. A chunk of American climbing history seems to have been left without a title. It's the bit between the end of the "Golden Years" (roughly the mid-1950s through the late '60s) and the time since sport climbing took over in the mid-1980s. That is, the period from about 1970 to roughly 1983–84.

Though unnamed, this was certainly an important period in climbing history, and it was characterized by some of the most impressive ascents that ever happened in the Western Hemisphere—hard free climbing, sketchy protection, and very limited use of permanent anchors. It melded with the hippie music and the dropout motif of the day—and the incredible amounts of drugs being consumed.

These guys and gals (the guys were numerous; the gals few—folks like Lynn Hill and Mari Gingery) did things their own way and pointed the way forward. Somehow, sport climbing subverted what should have been hard traditional free climbing's brilliant adulthood—hard trad would take a hit for several decades. (Though it's been revived, thankfully.) In the 1970s and early '80s, the guys and gals pushing the sport called themselves the Stonemasters, and their influence was felt not just in California but all over the continent.

Now, Rick Accomazzo, a central figure of the Stonemasters (these days a retired lawyer in Boulder), has written a book describing his life with that group and the life of Tobin Sorenson.

Compared with his Southern California brethren (a band of well-meaning misfits), Tobin Sorenson was a different egg. His life was anchored to religion. He swore off drugs and alcohol (he thought beer "taste[d] like piss"), and he climbed in the name of the Lord. In the early 1970s, he blitzed through Southern California, then Yosemite, setting a high bar with nearly every climb. Then he got into alpinism and rocked the world.

Accomazzo sums up his case for labeling Sorenson "the best climber in the world" at the end of the 1970s: "In the span of one year, starting in August 1977, after a long layoff, he climbed the hardest Alpine walls in Europe, putting up four new routes (including two on the fabled great north faces), the first alpine-style ascent of the Eiger Direct, and the third winter solo of the Matterhorn north face.... He had climbed the hardest Yosemite routes in near-perfect style at a time when Yosemite Valley contained