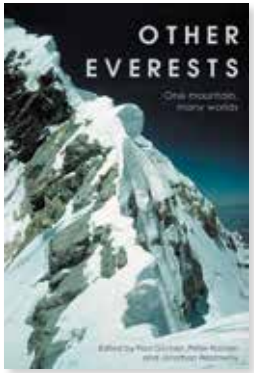


Other Everests
One mountain, many worlds
Edited by Paul Gilchrist, Peter H Hansen and Jonathan Westaway
Manchester University Press, 2024, 311pp, £19.99

The filmmaker David Lynch, in typical fashion, once said that in order to really get to know and understand a duck, one need only look at its eye. This small but essential part of the animal had a way of encapsulating the whole. The 'eye of the duck' became his metaphor for the particular scene in a film that was the locus, the key artistic expression that unlocked and represented the work.

While my synapses are not aligned in such a way that I would approach this concept from the same angle as Lynch, it is an interesting way to examine not just film, but a whole variety of topics. Contained in many things, from works of literature, to human inventions, to mountains, there is often a single element or story that might be said to encapsulate their essence. The idea is also, like a lot of things Lynch said, only half right.

A duck's eye cannot tell you that the animal will fly or that its feathers are waterproof any more than the 'In Dreams' scene of *Blue Velvet* expresses the totality of Lynch's attitudes to American suburbia or voyeurism.

Yet the idea does have power. Our myopic modern conception of Everest for example might be said to arise from two 'duck eyes': the story of George Mallory and the 1953 first ascent by Ed Hillary and Tenzing Norgay. I am not for a second dismissing these stories as unimportant to the history of Everest, but it would be hard to deny that they dominate the discourse around the mountain out of all proportion. And while these stories encapsulate much about the mountain and define our current perceptions of it, they can only tell us a small fraction of its story. Might we look beyond these two historical events and see (at the risk of truly exhausting the metaphor) the body and wings of the duck?

Enter *Other Everests*, a book that seeks to illuminate the too-often drowned-out stories of the world's highest mountain. Edited by Paul Gilchrist, Peter H Hansen and Jonathan Westaway, the book brings together 16 essays from historians and other scholars on topics as diverse as the naming of the mountain, its portrayal on stage and the use of social media in the Himalaya. With so many disparate topics it would have been easy for *Other Everests* to have slipped into a disconnected hodgepodge. Fortunately, thanks to the canny work of its editors, this is not the case. Gilchrist, Hansen and Westaway have carefully structured the collection to place the essays in conversation with each other, allowing themes to emerge and build so that they create a pleasingly complex and entangled picture.

This complexity is perhaps the book's greatest strength and an excellent antidote to the simplified, heroic narratives that have dominated the Everest conversation for more than 100 years. It is a work that is comfortable inhabiting the grey spaces of many of the issues that surround the mountain and it has a pleasing recognition that good and ill are neither sum nor static totals. I was particularly taken by Peter Mikša and Matija Zorn's piece on the 'Slovenian' Everest expedition of 1979 which recognised the expedition's role as an expression of Yugoslav and Slovenian identity, but avoided pigeonholing it as a simple imperialist exercise, acknowledging the unity it created among the team, people back home in Belgrade and its positive legacy in the mountaineering school at Manang, now operated and staffed entirely by Nepalis. This is not to say that the book goes easy on Everest mountaineering as an expression of empire and nationalism, but by covering these topics elsewhere in the book, Mikša and Zorn are allowed the freedom to range more widely without appearing to veer into apologia.

Ian Bellows is also on particularly good form in chapter 11 where he explores recent changes in the commercial Everest industry and, in particular, what these changes mean for Indigenous workers. His cogent analysis of the structure of the industry and the role of capital illustrates why fundamental change remains unlikely and he powerfully highlights that while the industry's growth has led to notoriety and prosperity for some Nepalis, the situation for many high-altitude workers remains fundamentally unchanged. For some at the lower end of the market it may in fact be worse.

As with all collections, the book has weak chapters as well as strong ones and it sinks to its lowest when the worst excesses of academic language are allowed to flourish. I found Jayeeta Sharma's chapter on Indigenous labour on Everest particularly frustrating, as the language not only obfuscated some of Sharma's points, but also distanced the reader from the individuals being discussed, transforming them into distant 'embodied infrastructure' rather than 'workers' or even 'people'.

If I have a complaint as a climber, it would be that some of the contributors have failed to fully engage with or understand mountaineering culture as it exists today. I was taken aback by Felix de Montety's assertion in chapter 2 that 'Mountain toponymy is a case study in modern mountaineering's limited interest in local knowledge and rampant blindness to political issues in the areas where climbing takes place.' He need only have read the previous issue of this *Journal* to know that Paul Ramsden and Tim Miller identified the name of their objective in the Salimor Khola from the inhabitants of a local village or accounts like Philip de-Beger's piece in this year's edition which highlights the role of Shimshalis throughout the history of the exploration of the Virjerab glacier.

Similarly, while Jenny Hall's chapter provides a much-needed boost to the profile of numerous female mountaineers and vital correctives to the ways in which they have often been characterised (usually by male writers), she accepts without question that speed and risk-taking are valorised in mountaineering. I think the picture on both counts is rather more complex. The Piolets d'Or do not reward expeditions where participants die and debates around speed as a fundamental expression of climbing prowess persist.

That said, these are rare moments of more black and white thinking in a work which is, in general, enthusiastic to embrace nuance. Even those chapters which chafed against my climber's sensibilities had much of value and, to a degree, that chafing is a result of the diversity of thought the book is successfully bringing to its subject.

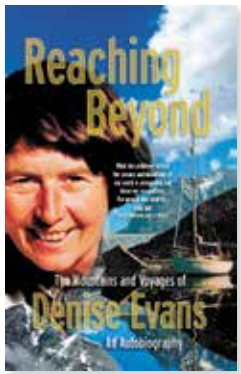
If my frustrations seem acute, it is because they are borne from wanting this book to be as accessible as possible to mountaineers. The history and culture of Everest is far wider and more complex than the stories we tell most often would have us believe. We have allowed the mountain to calcify into a single image when, as the subtitle of the book suggests, it actually offers 'many worlds' to the informed observer.

This dynamic quality of the mountain finds perhaps its best articulation in an unlikely chapter. In 'Far-away frontiers and spiritual sanctuaries: occidental escapism in the high Himalaya' Tim Chamberlain offers us not an analysis of Everest, but of western conceptions of the Himalaya, and particularly of Tibet. In concluding, he notes '… we must always remember that what we are seeing is only half the picture, and that picture was always a mutable one.'

Chamberlain also quotes Rinchen Lhamo, the Tibetan wife of British Consul and author Louis Magrath King, who said of western depictions of Tibet: 'It is so much easier to say what is expected than what is true, but contrary to established views.' By taking the harder path and planting its flag outside of established narratives, this book offers readers much more than the half picture of Everest to which we have become accustomed.

The complete book is open access and a digital copy can be downloaded free of charge via Manchester University Press' ***manchesterhive.com****.*

Adam Butterworth



Reaching Beyond
The Mountains and Voyages of Denise Evans. An autobiography.
Delfryn Publications, 2024, 282pp, £19.95

Denise Evans holds the distinction of being the first and so far only female president of the Alpine Club.

Lady Denise Evans, to give her formal name, was appointed in 1986, after the incumbent president, Anthony Rawlinson, died in a fall from Crib Goch. Denise was the senior of the Club's two vice-presidents – the other was Hamish Nicol – and was nominated by the committee to take over.

There were apparently no fanfares to mark her arrival, barely ten years after the Club first admitted women. She served for the rest of that year, and was by all accounts diligent and hard-working. At the end of that year she stood down and the next (male) president, George Band, took over.

If her incumbency attracted little attention, Denise also had to contend with being better known in some circles for two of her relationships. She was the daughter of the pioneering woman climber, Nea Morin, whose name is enshrined in the route *Nea* on Clogwyn y Grochan, which she made the first ascent of with Menlove Edwards in 1941. And she was the wife of Charles Evans, the deputy leader of the 1953 Everest expedition. They married in 1957 and when he was knighted in 1970 she became Lady Evans.

There is now an opportunity to redress the balance in her favour. *Reaching Beyond* is the autobiographical account of her life, with the subtitle 'The Mountains and Voyages of Denise Evans'. The book has an intriguing provenance. In 2019, at the prompting of Cathy Woodhead, a fellow member of the Pinnacle Club, Denise embarked on writing an account of her life. The outcome was a manuscript of 220,000 words – around twice the length of most conventional books. After Denise died, and with funding provided by the Alpine Club and others, Cathy engaged an editor, Kelly Davis, to convert the manuscript to a more publishable size. *Reaching Beyond* is the outcome.

Denise was born in Paris in August 1931. Her mother Nea was already a celebrated climber who had married Jean Morin, a musician and fellow alpinist in 1928. At the start of the Second World War, Nea took Denise and her brother Ian to live in Criccieth, providing her first sight of Snowdonia. In 1943 Denise's father, who had enlisted in the Free French forces, was killed following a mission to Gibraltar, when his plane was shot down off the French coast. Denise writes that she 'never got over the tragic enormity of his death'.

The family moved to Kent after the war and in 1952 Denise took up a place at Oxford, where she studied French and German at Lady Margaret Hall. After Oxford she worked as a translator at the BBC and also, like her mother, began translating French climbing books into English, starting with *Makalu* by Jean Francois.

Denise first climbed on the sandstone outcrops of Harrison's Rocks and, during a spell living in Paris after the war, at Fontainebleau. Climbing at a high level in Snowdonia, she joined the Pinnacle Club in 1949. In the early 1950s she and Nea recorded a number of first all-female ascents in the Dolomites and the Mont Blanc range. In 1956 she joined an expedition to explore the glaciers of West Greenland which made the first ascent of Mount Atter (1640m).

On her return, Denise became a volunteer instructor at the new National Outdoor Centre at Plas y Brenin, which is where she met Charles Evans, who, following Everest, led the successful British expedition to Kangchenjunga in 1955. They were married in August 1956 after Charles returned from an expedition which climbed Annapurna IV. Their honeymoon consisted of a sailing trip along the Scottish coast north of Oban in a 37-foot ocean racer named Triune.

They took a second honeymoon in 1957, when she and Charles conducted an ambitious trekking and climbing trip in the SoluKhumbu region of Nepal. In 1958 they visited the USSR, where Charles had been invited to deliver a series of lectures. In the same year, Charles was appointed Principal of