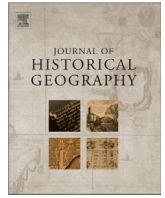


Contents lists available at [SciVerse ScienceDirect](http://www.sciencedirect.com)

Journal of Historical Geography

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jhg

Review

Peter H. Hansen, *The Summits of Modern Man: Mountaineering after the Enlightenment*. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2013, 392 pages, US\$35.00 hardcover.

Peter Hansen has written extensively on mountaineering, contributing many articles on nineteenth-century British mountaineers, including a résumé of the founders of the Alpine Club, to the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. But his intellectual interests have also extended to studies on empire, and modernity, and these threads come together in his ambitious and successful *The Summits of Modern Man*. This is a sophisticated cultural history of mountains, and the men – and women – drawn to them, rather than the straightforward mountaineering narrative that the subtitle might suggest. The approach is intellectual, and formidably learned: in the opening pages alone there are references to the works of Fernand Braudel, Jacob Burckhardt, Ernst Cassirer, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Ruskin, and Edward Said; and, demonstrating the author's happy eclecticism, Monty Python's Terry Jones. No stone has been left unturned where it might yield a clue, and the ground that has been covered is too extensive to summarize here. A few vignettes will perhaps give a flavour: of Jacques Balmat and Michel-Gabriel Paccard literally racing one another to be first to the summit of Mont Blanc in the evening light of 8 August 1786; of Henriette d'Angeville untying herself from the rope before taking her last three steps to the summit in 1838; of Pope John Paul II's helicopter-assisted levitation and benediction above the same spot in July 1990; of Edward Whymper and his colleagues marking their ascent of the Matterhorn in 1865 by sending down a 'torrent of stones' on the rival Italians on a ridge below; and of Ötzi, the Neolithic man, emerging from his burial in a glacier on the Austrian–Italian border in 1991, more than five thousand years after he had been interred.

That Hansen has himself scaled the Matterhorn doubtless gives special insight to his understanding of Alpine mountaineering, which dominates the book. Even the penultimate chapter on the first ascent of Everest, in 1953, casts back to the first ascent of Mont Blanc, in 1786, and there are indeed many parallels to be drawn between those signal events, not least the unedifying controversies that ensued over 'who was first' – Hillary or Tenzing? Paccard or Balmat? – or even the 'savant' Horace-Bénédict de Saussure, who epitomized the spirit of the Enlightenment and was consequently hailed by Kant as 'the first mortal to climb to the summit of Mont Blanc' (113). The competing claims of Paccard, Balmat and Saussure to the honours on Mont Blanc continued to be advanced long after their own deaths, and their story runs like a *Leitmotiv* through the work. Hansen illustrates the broader social and cultural significance of what each of these three pioneers came to represent wonderfully well, and he does the same for Hillary, and particularly Tenzing, in the excellent chapter on Everest. In suggesting, though, that 'the attempts to climb Mont Blanc from 1775 to 1786 should be understood as cultural counterparts' (pp. 64–65) of the politics of

enfranchisement in Savoy, he draws a conclusion that, while plausible, is based on supposition and not sources. It is, however, central to his argument that mountaineering became a vertical expression of an individual sovereignty that might be denied in other spheres. This aspiration to go upwards, and be the first, owes everything to the educative and liberating influence of the Enlightenment, and can be summarized with a twist on Mallory's immortal rationale: not so much 'because it is there' as 'because I am here'.

The relationship between mountaineering and modernity is at the core of this work. Hansen argues that they 'mutually constituted one another in the eighteenth century and have continued to do so' (p. 11). Modernity in his eyes is best understood as a fluid concept, 'a cluster of cultural and political formations that are historical – varying by time and place – and performative' (p. 17). Equipped with this analytical tool, the mountains become 'a vantage point from which to observe the braiding together of self, state, and mountain in historical knots of time' (p. 17). In alluding to 'time knots' Hansen draws on Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial thought and historical difference* (2000), and the reader would benefit from a familiarity with this influential work. Hansen seeks to 'provincialize', that is, render mountaineering narratives not universal, but rather local and specific; in the process he questions the modern assumptions that place the mountaineer 'alone on the summit, autonomous from other men and dominant over nature' (p. 2). In his view, all is connected, interwoven.

The subtlety of this approach is evident in his treatment of the bitter dispute between the peasant Balmat and his social superior, Dr Paccard, over which was first to the summit of Mont Blanc: 'a tension that cannot be resolved as a question of discovery or by asking who was first. Rather, it appears that both were first since each occupied a position distinct from the other' (p. 117). Ingenious, but it still leaves one asking the question that will not go away, and which *had to be* answered after the first ascent of Everest in 1953. Hansen himself illustrates, in a taut chapter on Everest, that the diplomatic formula used to describe Hillary's and Tenzing's joint achievement – 'We reached the summit almost together' – did not sate curiosity around the world, so that in 1955 Tenzing felt obliged to put the issue to rest in his autobiography, out of respect for the mountain as much as anything else.

Does it matter who was first? Perhaps not; but, as Hansen points out, it is the fact that the question is raised that is important, because it 'envisages not mutual interdependence but an unnumbered self' (p. 3). This, he suggests, is one of the myths that comes with modernity. Balmat and Paccard relied on one another's Alpenstocks to climb Mont Blanc, while Hillary implicitly acknowledged the partnerships involved on Everest with his greeting to his fellow New Zealander George Lowe on the South Col: 'Well, George, we knocked the bastard off!' And even the remarkable soloist Ueli Steck depends upon a support team – how else can we witness his incredible speed ascents of the north faces

of the Eiger, Matterhorn, and Grandes Jorasses in 2008/9? It comes as no surprise that Hansen originally considered writing a book about first ascent controversies, because they illustrate one of his central concerns, which is to show that mountaineering derives from, and reinforces, a presumption of individual autonomy, which is an essential facet of modernity. The upward flight of his analysis – ‘The verticality of the mountains locates us in a

continuum of past and present and future’ (p. 302) – occasionally induces a sense of vertigo, and a hankering for an approach more empirically grounded, but it is the theoretical thrust of the work that endows it with its *éclat*.

Mark Pottle
Wolfson College, University of Oxford, UK