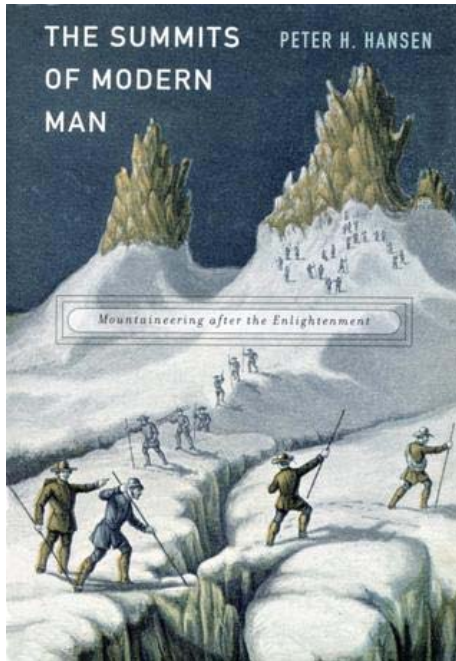


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Peaks of human success

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Facts, figures and theory combine into a tale of trekkers who sought solitude and success at the mountain-top

There is certainly much more to mountaineering than a mere act of scrambling up rocks, hills, and vales. It is an act of deliberation, a recognition of the strong will to succeed, to ascent and ascertain the self. Anyone who has scaled a peak would have felt the rush of adrenalin, the surge of excitement, that unmistakable outpouring of thrill and exhilaration as the strong wind gushes past and the land below heaves and flows with the undulation of the horizon and skies. In his monumental work on mountaineering Peter Hansen explores the intricacies of climbing and theorises on the act's social and psychological significance. The book under review is a serious engagement with men and mountains from the vantage points of social history, eco-critical theorising and cultural geography.

In the early 19 century Mont Blanc became a temple and the Alps were viewed as cathedrals of the earth. Alexander Dumas recounted the first ascent of Mont Blanc as the triumph of the sovereign individual. As a young man he himself was in a state of hurry. The son of a Creole general in the Napoleonic army, he ascended from the position as a clerk to become a playwright and successful author of bestsellers like *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *The Three Musketeers*. In his *Impressions of Swiss Travel*, Dumas published his interview with Jacques Balmat, "the intrepid guide who amid a thousand dangers had been the first to attain the highest summit of Mont Blanc." Dumas portrayed him as the King of Mont Blanc, and the image of the lone conqueror, proudly waving to his subjects below. In actuality this would befit the image of the author himself. Dumas appropriated Balmat's story of the ascent to place himself in the summit position. It has been remarked that *The Impressions of Swiss Travel*, rejuvenated the genre of travel writing as "an epic of the self... an affirmation of subjectivity." The ascent of the tall peaks signalled the ascent of modern man who represented the triumph of the will to achieve and to conquer.

For the European Romantics the mountains signified the sublime and the snowy heights were associated with religious awe and faith. However the image often shifted between impossibility and despair. Also, it was not unusual for women to scale up mountains and ascertain their individual selves, as the ascent of Mont Blanc by Marie Paradis in 1808 and the narratives that ensued thereon would show.

In search of solitude

The Summits of Modern Man is a phenomenal achievement; it links facts, figures, and theory into one powerful and intriguing tale of the trekkers who ventured in to the vertical heights of mountains in search of solitude and victories. The spring-board to encounter risk, danger and death was mostly that desire to conquer and dominate the wild and tame nature. The impetus of Natural history and theology also has contributed to this will to excel. As Hansen notes: "Mountain climbing did not emerge as the expression of a preexisting condition known as "modernity," but rather was one of the practices that constructed and redefined multiple modernities during debates over who was first."

However as he concludes, when seen from the longer perspective of geological history, or *deep history*, to view anyone as first would be to "privilege the moment of beginning, not the process of becoming that precedes it and unfolds within it." The verticality of mountains locates us in a *continuum of past present and future*. To conquer its summit is to exist briefly in time and space and feel the ephemerality and evanescence of being.

Hansen's book covers so much ground in terms of history and narrative, examining extracts from many sources. When perceived from the point-of-view of Euro-centric history the disputed chronicling and accounts of the first ascents of Mount Everest and Mont Blanc suggest the intertwining of a colonial dynamics entwining subjectivity, sovereignty and the natural world. Nevertheless, as he argues, "modernity rather than empire serves as the analytical anchor for the bely that is this book, which could have been written only in dialogue with postcolonial and subaltern studies and the cultural and imperial turns of the last few decades."

Multiple modernities illustrate tensions among self, state and mountain. Petrarch, representing the Renaissance individual, is dubbed the first modern man by the mid-19th century — his account of the ascent of Mont Ventoux came to be recognised as a struggle toward the formulation of a political and historical category — the paradigm of the individual self and identity of the modern individual man.

King Charles VIII was on a pilgrimage in the mountains when he spotted Mont Inaccessible and he ordered his artillery officer Antoine de Ville to climb it. Eventually after dominating the peak and learning that it had another local name — Aiguille — Antoine de Ville baptised the peak Aiguille Fort in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, for the love of the monarch. For more than three centuries the ascent of Mont Aiguille was satirised or celebrated as a symbol of monarchical sovereignty, while the ceremonies of possession varied over geographical territories.

Aldo Leopold's *Sand County Almanac* celebrates the notion of *thinking like a mountain*, as a metaphor for the network of inter subjective relationships between humans and the natural world — as an alternative to anti-ecological activities of science and technology — not reducible to the solipsism of *thinking like a self* or the system building abstraction of *thinking like a state*.

First on Everest

On the day of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, the news of the British conquest of Mount Everest was relayed to London. Edmund Hillary, the New Zealander and Tenzing Norgay, the Sherpa had reached the world's highest summit on May 29, 1953. The British had an aggrandised sense of having got there first. However, as recollected by Sir John Hunt who had led the expedition, a few years later when they returned, the illustrations that adorned the triumphal arches along the road, depicted inglorious pictures of an almost unconscious Hillary being dragged hand over hand by the rope to the summit of Mount Everest by Tenzing the Sherpa, who had very little sense of a conquest in this act. While Hillary was knighted Tenzing was deferred any special mention on account of his dubious nationality — whether Nepalese or Indian. It was debated renaming the peak as *Mount Elizabeth*. An Indian newspaper poll went against this in favour of "Mount Tenzing." *The Statesman* published a photograph of a street in the Sherpa neighbourhood with the caption: "Not Fit for Heroes — it is to homes like these that some Sherpa porters return from their mountaineering."

Tenzing's poverty before the ascent was an important symbol of his incorporation into a prosperous new India on his return. He was awarded a radio, gramophone, electric stove, wrist watches, pieces of gold, 180 square yards of land, and a Gandhi cap, while his wife received a sewing machine.

Jawaharlal Nehru handed over a whole wardrobe of old clothes to Tenzing which fitted him to a tee. But he refrained from handing over his white Congress party hat because he thought that the grand adulation Tenzing received might spoil him and make him unfit for social work!

The significant question that troubled quite a few with regard to mountaineering as a challenge was *who was there first?* And while versions of "thinking like a state" dominated the Everest expeditions of the mid-20th century, the act of conquering nature began to appear more and more ambivalent in the post-technological world of the present.

To conclude, *The Summits of Modern Man* is not just another book on mountain climbing. It is an inquiry into the making of the modern world, and takes up various issues of current relevance reviewing historical periodisations like renaissance, enlightenment, romanticism, nationalism, fascism, decolonisation, globalisation and climate change. As Hansen notes: "Mountaineering did not emerge after enlightenment, they arrived together." Thus history, philosophy, cultural geography, literature, natural history, and personal narratives configure the warp and woof of Hansen's book

on mountaineering after the enlightenment. It would delight the reader through erudite observations rather than arduous arguments, recalling the efforts and thrills of mountaineering at every stage.

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