

Mount Will

The men and women who made mountains into cultural peaks in fascinating formations

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THE SUMMITS OF MODERN MAN
Mountaineering after the Enlightenment
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On August 8, 1786, two men reached the highest point in Europe, which to them was the top of the world: both hailed from Chamonix, a clockless rusticity of roofs in the valley below. Michel-Gabriel Paccard was its up-to-date doctor; Jacques Balmat a peasant farmer and chamois hunter with a sideline in crystals. For decades the mountain in question, some three miles high, had been celebrated for its glaciers, not its snow-capped altitude; Chamonix had very few visitors before the 1770s. Only hunters ever dared to go high in these colossal mountains, the peaks sensibly given up to dragons and ghosts – the mind's old poetry of health and safety.

William Windham, a young Englishman on his grand tour, had led a mock caravan to Savoy's glaciers in 1741 and published a pamphlet with a fellow traveller, Pierre Martel, in which the name "Mont Blanc" appears as the supposed highest point. Thus the mountain was first "discovered" – one of the plethora of assumptions that Peter Hansen gleefully dismantles in this learned and complex analysis of "multiple modernities" as seen through the prism of mountaineering.

Two essential elements of modernity are the foundation myth and the assertion of the solitary will: both illustrated by Petrarch's ascent of Mont Ventoux in 1336. Interrupting his admiration of the view by opening St Augustine's *Confessions* at random, Petrarch fell on a stern admonition: "And men go to admire the high mountains . . . and pass themselves by". He hurried back down in silence, convinced of the vaster landscape of contemplation. Five hundred years later, Jacob Burckhardt identified this moment in Provence as the arrival of the inward-looking "modern man", the beginning of the modern age.

This need for firsts is, of course, in itself modern; and, as Hansen points out, the assigning of Petrarch's ascent as a boundary moment coincided with the rise of modern mountaineering. Peaks are, as he claims early on in *The Summits of Modern Man*, "a vantage point from which to observe the braiding together of self, state and mountain in historical knots of time". Hansen owes the concept of time knots, or multiple temporalities held within a single moment, to the Bengali historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, whose *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial thought and historical difference* (2000) is perhaps not sufficiently acknowledged here. Provincializing, however, is Hansen's main emphasis, as he transposes the romantic generalities of mountaineering's history into the particular, the contingent and the local. The simple act of defying death by climbing Mont Blanc (the celebrated geologist Horace-Bénédict de Saussure offered a reward while deeming such a feat impossible) becomes entangled in local histories, and most particularly in those of regional sovereignty and enfranchisement.

Paccard, Balmat and others are part of a dynamic, a continuum in which the beginnings so cherished by modernity enter a far broader flow than individual achievement and lonely heroism.

This is not to deny the extraordinary courage and drive of these two men and their successors, a drive that was soon to spread to anywhere in the globe that is sufficiently vertical. Even now, Mont Blanc (originally the *mont maudit*, the cursed mountain) claims its fatal share each year of the 20,000 visitors who struggle up its flanks: in 2012 a single avalanche near the peak swept twenty-one experienced climbers away, nine of whom died. The problem these days is the very

modern one of overcrowding, although inexperience is also an issue.

We are a far cry here from Johann Scheuchzer's *Itinera Alpina* (1708), which not only catalogued the dragons of the Swiss Alps, but was perhaps the earliest example of the sublime aesthetic, gazing on the mountains with awe and terror. Scheuchzer was much more interested in specimen collection than in what Hansen repeatedly terms "the summit position" – which was only for God and, as the natural historian put it, "disagreeable" to reach. Hansen carefully teases out the shifts in thought that altered this reserve. The heights of emotion in Rousseau's best-selling Alpine novel *Julie* (1761) matched the transparently divine glory of the mountains: but it was politics, according to this present account, that pushed men to the liminal top, from where "the panoramic prospect . . . from a single viewpoint" matched the contemporary struggle for popular sovereignty in Geneva.

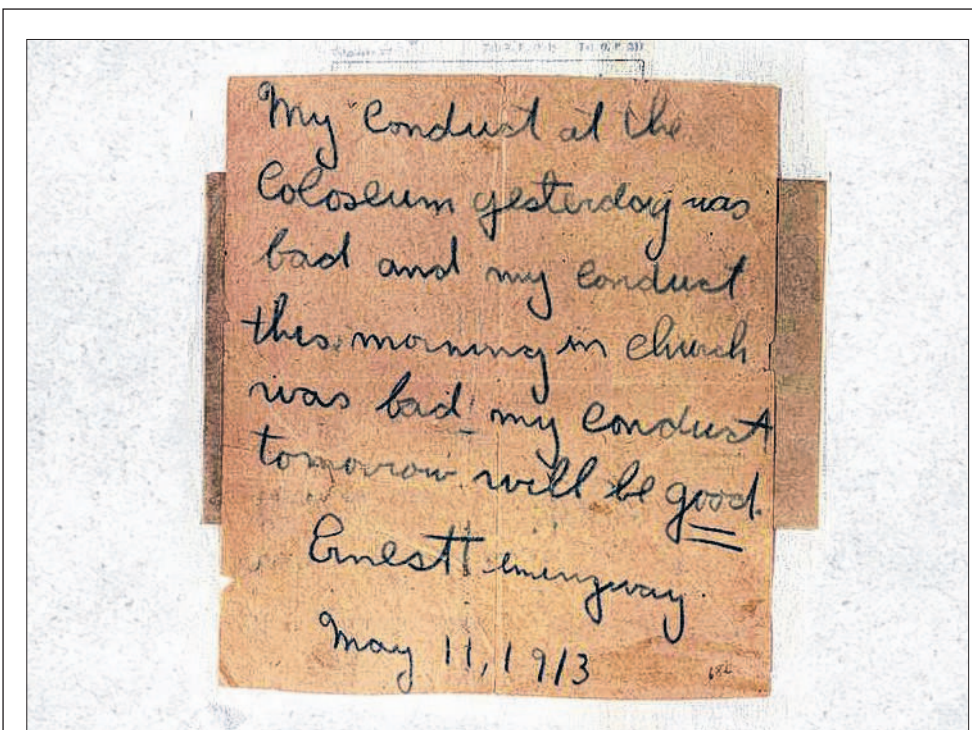
While the book's passages on Savoy politics make for a stiff climb, not helped by the author's rigorous denial of picturesque digres-

sion, they are necessary to the whole. It is with some relief that we come to a political agitator like Micheli du Crest, taking trigonometric readings off a rain gutter from his prison in the Swiss fortress of Aarburg: he not only created the first panorama of the Alps but, in a letter of 1754, suggested a full ascent of Mont Blanc for cartographic purposes. Likewise, Saussure, Marc-Théodore Bourrit and Jean-André Deluc (who felt "suspended in the air" on the Buet glacier) were all early climbers whose "aspirations for individual sovereignty . . . made it possible to envision the summit position". Saussure's *Voyage dans les Alpes* (1779) never intended to replace God with the author in its celebrated panoramic circular drawing from the summit of the Buet: this revolutionary God's-eye view was again a response, in Hansen's persuasive argument, to urgent political questions "in this corner of provincial Europe". These early ascents into the unknown were "cultural counterparts" to enfranchisement.

They also meant changes for the locals, hitherto dismissed, with their impenetrable dialect, as backward. Hunters turned guides, the valleys' young men provided the model for the later Himalayan sherpa, intrepid but never servile. A "tall and robust" Chamonix guide told Saussure that all he needed was a parasol and a bottle of smelling salts; presumably the *Alpenstock* and small axe used for centuries by shepherds over snowfield and glacier were taken as read. Unsurprisingly, Paccard almost died on one of his numerous attempts in 1784; when Bourrit, the most widely read author on Alpine climbing, "discovered" a better route via the same Bionnassay glacier, he was encouraged to undertake a major expedition in 1785 with Saussure. Although the latter stood outside his tent one night and felt that "I alone had survived in the universe", they were defeated by fresh snow.

Hansen makes it clear that the "competitive masculinities" still at the core of most mountaineering narratives have their roots in that indigenous toughness and the admiration it provoked from cerebral naturalists like Saussure. It is likely that Paccard picked out Balmat after the young man returned alive from a night alone on the snow (another first) with news of a new route up. Concurrently with the end of Chamonix's feudal obligations in the summer of 1786, the proto-Jacobin doctor and the peasant Balmat reached the summit, but only after Paccard had taken his readings with barometer and thermometer. They raced each other to the highest point.

For some two centuries, there were furious quarrels as to who was first: Balmat's role was initially downplayed, but the waspish Bourrit claimed in a published letter that Balmat, after attaining the summit, had gone back to assist an exhausted Paccard (we do know he suffered severe sunburn and snow blindness). Balmat reached the summit again



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The thirteen-year-old Ernest Hemingway is here shown in apologetic mood, in a note preserved by his mother, Grace, in one of six volumes of scrapbooks documenting her elder son's life to the age of eighteen. Hemingway's childhood in Oak Park, Illinois, seems, if his mother's archiving is anything to go by, to have been dominated by the activities of the Congregational Church, to which the family belonged. Many

pages are taken up with programmes from services and concerts (in which Ernest's sisters feature more prominently), with only occasional glimpses of the young fisherman and his catch, or of Ernest's own watercolours of birdlife. This note refers, in familiar style, to a Protestant missionary exposition at the Chicago Coliseum. The scrapbooks have been newly digitized by the JFK Library (jfklibrary.org).

a year later, and the two men came to blows in Chamonix, Paccard striking the other to the ground with what must have been a sturdy umbrella. Both men were eclipsed by the already celebrated Saussure in the same year, mainly because his successful ascent had all the latest scientific gadgets.

Modernity was also revealing itself in the respectful partnership between *savant* and *paysan*; Hansen draws a parallel with Wordsworth and his eye-opening encounter with a “peasant” on the Simplon Pass. He adds, however, that Kant, in his positing of a transcendental aesthetics in *The Critique of Judgement*, distinguished Saussure from both the sceptical indigenes and the crampon-sporting hobbyists by his desire to edify, which opened him to elevating sentiments during the ascent and made him, for Kant, “the first mortal to climb to the summit of Mont Blanc”.

The unassuming Paccard – who would take to wandering the mountains alone with a dash of opium – began to be left behind in the narrative because, as Hansen puts it, he “did not fit the model”: neither peasant guide nor (being from Chamonix) a travelling adventurer. A statue of him sitting alone was finally unveiled in the now chic town on the ascent’s bicentenary (a full ninety-nine years after the monument to Balmat and Saussure): its trendy materials had serious issues with the first winter, and it was redone in bronze. *The Summits of Modern Man* proclaims both Paccard and Balmat as “first” on the summit in the sense that they occupied such distinct positions: “the ascent did not embody one representation of enlightenment, modernity, masculinity, or individuality, but entangled competing and mutually constitutive contemporary visions of each”. I am not sure that statement would have done much to persuade them to agree, although a fascinating later chapter shows how Sherpa Tenzing, at least, was saying something similar during the Everest quarrels, with all their nationalist and imperial overtones, following the “conquest” of 1953.

With the French Revolution’s incursion into Savoy, which became the Département du Mont Blanc, the Jacobin Dr Paccard rose to be the canton’s officer of health, and flame-burning models of Mont Blanc declared the peak a symbol of the new liberty. The ultra-radical Montagnards demurred: verticality being anti-democratic, *pace* their name, they soon set about destroying all the département’s “pretentious” church steeples. The mountain equably served as a symbol of liberty for the other side, particularly for the crowds of refugees fleeing into Piedmont along the Chamonix valley; when the royal troops briefly invaded in 1793, Paccard’s house was burned down. This symbolic role continues into the twenty-first century: despite the endless accidents and the environmental damage caused by far too many visitors, it is deemed unthinkable to curtail free access by restricting numbers.

Chateaubriand famously derided the revolutionary mountain in his *Voyage au Mont Blanc*, while Wordsworth found its summit “a soulless image on the eye”: for Hansen, however, these are critiques of revolutionary politics in the region. Intriguingly, visiting writers would have been influenced by encounters with locals acting like modern estate agents: “by the 1790s, guides of Chamonix had a reputation for leading clients over routes that used surprise to heighten sentiment”. The thoughts of the ultra-royalist



Chamonix, Mont Blanc, by John Ruskin

and Catholic Jacques Balmat are not recorded during all this, but when he dragged a local woman to the summit and made of Marie Paradis another first, Hansen suggests that it was to show up Paccard (even a woman can do it) and perhaps reclaim Bastille Day for the Virgin. Paradis, on recovering from her ordeal, suggested to her neighbours in Chamonix that they make the voyage themselves as there was too much for her to recount – thus mocking “the transcendent individualism” of more literary constructions. Even the iron summit cross Balmat erected on his ascent in 1811 with other guides has “layers of meaning and significance”; it was ordered by the Napoleonic state as a trigonometric signal.

There is an equally intriguing section on the Shelleys. While the poet signed the visitor’s book “atheists one and all” – despising the locals as “leeches” – and denied Mont Blanc anything more than a “still and solemn power” in his eponymous poem, his wife dreamed up *Frankenstein*. This particular genre-busting work shows a similarly “entangled” ambivalence in its critique of rationalism, the Revolution, and science’s mastering masculinity in the character of Dr Frankenstein, alongside a discreet sympathy for a maternal Christianity: Alan Liu’s comment on the whiteness of Mont Blanc is usefully quoted: “[it] is the space in which history can ghost into the present; not no meaning but a panic of too much possible meaning”.

While Hansen locates this panic in the mountain’s oscillation between secular and sacred at the behest of either revolutionaries or royalists, the truth may have been untidier. The academic’s tendency to lapse into theory briefly overcomes a discussion of the “Temple of Nature” erected by Bourrit at Montanvert in 1795, on the very edge of the Mer de Glace – the frozen sea that may (or may not) represent “the limit of normal theoretical terrain” where discourse becomes “non-verbal practice”. The building was also a refuge for climbers, the first of many, of which the latest has just opened: a huge solar-powered silver carbuncle just below the summit (invisible on normal approach) aimed at challenging wild campers who leave their rubbish and excre-

ment after spending much of the summer bivouacked in snow on the highest slopes. The effect of Bourrit’s temple was more radical, if not unsimilar: to turn the entire mountain into a hymn to nature – an entanglement of the religious and the secular that Hansen’s nimble fingers do much to clarify.

The mountains’ romantic allure had subsided to “a commodity of leisure time” by the mid-nineteenth century: Albert Smith’s *Ascent of Mont Blanc* used slides, music and ambling St Bernards to allow the masses a vicarious taste of the mountain’s fearful thrills without leaving Piccadilly. If this feels uncomfortably familiar, the account of Balmat’s death in the 1830s is even more so. A legendary figure in his seventies, he had long fallen into debt supporting an extended family, and his hunt for crystals had developed into a search for gold on the cliffs of Mont Ruan, where he fell into a crevasse. His companion, Louis Pache, kept silent and was jailed on suspicion of murder, released only when his wife committed suicide. The Balmat family was reduced to penury; four of Balmat’s grandchildren died of an epidemic within the month. Twenty years later, the government official in Sixt confessed that he had known through witnesses that Balmat’s death was accidental, but had ordered Pache to keep silent for fear of a gold rush and the subsequent devastation of the valleys. Hansen rightly claims these fears to be legitimate, pointing to later mining discoveries and their consequences, but is typically cautious of anachronistic parallels: “Consider them alternative modernities”.

For Balmat and many others, “gold” represented a variety of widely shared hopes and desires, and a form of subjectivity distinct in many respects from the dreams of individual sovereignty envisioned by the financially secure social climbers whom he and other guides led to the summit.

Paccard had died, a heavy drinker, in 1827, eleven years before Henriette d’Angeville reached the summit aged forty-two, having claimed Mont Blanc to be her “frozen lover” in a “monomania of the imagination”, and anticipating “the delicious hour during which I will rest on his summit”. Her extraordinary

courage and sheer will were obscured by sexist and suggestive commentary on her return, but she claimed (predictably by now) to be the first woman who made the ascent, Marie Paradis admitting to having been “dragged, pulled, carried, etc” in a dialogue noted down by – Henriette d’Angeville. She occupies a prominent place in her straw hat, ballooning skirts and long scarf in the refurbished museum in Chamonix.

Yet hypermasculinity was now the order of the day: Edward Whymper’s portrait of the Alpine Club exhibits the “muscular ethos” (in Hansen’s words) of mountaineering’s “golden age”. This dated from Alfred Wills’s ascent of the Matterhorn in 1854 and was firmly British: clipped to the Empire, its sun only set in the 1950s. Its chauvinism was dramatically illustrated by the “Matterhorn catastrophe” of 1865. Whymper beat an Italian party to the summit and gleefully dislodged a “torrent of stones” on the foreign heads; a clumsy companion slipped on the descent and dragged everyone but Whymper and two Zermatt guides (father and son) to their deaths. Although Dickens perceptively called it “a waste of human life – a gift too holy to be played with like a toy . . . by bragging vanity” (he would no doubt have much to say about contemporary mountaineering), Whymper made the disaster the “manly” (Ruskin’s approving term) climax of his *Scrambles Amongst the Alps* of 1871; if its martial language has been replaced these days by tech-speak and mordant slang (“screamer” for a very long fall, “chilled off” for killed), its laconic tone is still with us. The three were saved, surprisingly, by the feebleness of their inferior rope, and Whymper makes much of a vision of two spectral crosses in the sky as they descended to safety. It is surprising that Hansen omits to mention the inquiry’s suspicion that the older guide, Peter Taugwalder, had chosen an old rope or had actually cut it; he subsequently went mad.

The first ascents of Mont Blanc are cultural peaks around which subsequent times and histories swirl in fascinating formations: we are shown monuments, novels, poems and films endlessly re-envisioning what appears to be a simple story of men triumphing over a mass of rock – the most original being Blaise Cendrars’s “Dictaphone” narrative of 1929 spun around Balmat’s summit burial of three prune stones. Each period (including that of the Nazis) casts its own giant shadow on the swirl, not least when, as Hansen shows in his penultimate chapter, Everest (aka nature) was conquered and the first ascent of Mont Blanc was rewritten: Hillary as the modest Paccard, Tenzing as Balmat – the exotic “other” appropriated by the postcolonial moment.

The complex time knot thus created makes this one of the most revealing accounts of the Everest expedition that I have read. But Hansen provokingly leaves us, after a commentary on the way climate change has taken the zip out of our species’ sovereignty, with the Rückenfigur of Ötzi, the Neolithic individual revealed by melting ice on the Austrian-Italian frontier. Another time knot, he suggests, on the long belay that connects us to Ötzi and to everyone else, clinging to the verticality that represents “the continuum of past and present and future”; although, as he reminds us, our present summit position is “ephemeral and evanescent . . . we can never step on the same mountain twice”.