

Everest: Eighty years of triumph and tragedy, edited by Peter Gillman

Little, Brown, £18.99

Review by Gordon Stainforth for *On the Edge*, June 2001

In an age in which it seems to have become the norm to sneer at Everest, this radically updated version of Peter Gillman's 1993 anthology comes as a refreshing antidote. Subtitled 'eighty years of triumph and tragedy', what the book in effect does is explain what the phenomenon of Everest is all about - in this very short span of history this mountain has become the ultimate symbol of the human urge to excel, which has indeed led to extremes of grief and exultation. The net result is a book that dispels all cynicism; the subject, like the mountain, is just too big.

The first point to remember is that Everest is unique, and not just slightly. It is a full 785 feet (nearly two Great Pyramids) higher than anything else on earth. It is very close to the limit of how high a mountain can be before the rock at its base liquifies, and as Peter Lloyd points out (p.234): 'Were it 1,000 feet lower it would have been climbed in 1924. Were it a 1,000 feet higher it would have been an engineering problem.'

So here, in what is undoubtedly the finest collection of writing on Everest that has ever been assembled, we find a wonderful range of intense writing, covering the full gamut of human emotions. And it's well chosen: the accounts of the 1963 American West Ridge expedition and the 1984 Australian North Face direct by Hornbein and Henderson, for example, are both far better than those in their 'official' expedition books. Of course one could niggle about the choice of some pieces, because there are some curious omissions; and Messner's account is surprisingly threadbare and inadequate. While a full three pages are devoted to a distinctly underwhelming story about the last two pictures that Herrod took at the summit before he died, Alison Hargreaves' enormous achievement of soloing the North-East Ridge in 1995 without oxygen - the first woman to do so - is reduced to a one-sentence mention; and Goran Kropp, a preposterous cross between Silvo Karo and John Cleese, who cycled the whole way from Sweden, eschewing all support and bypassing the ice fall on the left side to solo the south-east ridge without oxygen, before cycling all the way back again, merely gets a one-word mention in the list of ascents. And surely Matt Dickinson's engrossing account of the north-east ridge should have been featured?

But the book is brimming with interesting details. Finch we find, unlike his contemporaries in their plus-fours, dressed in an amazingly modern down jacket in 1922; we learn, rather gruesomely that Mallory's frozen body 'creaked like a log' when they moved it in 1999; and I had forgotten that Hillary cut steps all the way on the first ascent, despite wearing presumably quite primitive crampons. There are also some useful linking essays by Gillman e.g. on the enormous achievement of the Sherpas and the mystery of the yeti (though he doesn't mention Whillan's very convincing sighting and photograph, or Mike Ward's flat denial that Eric Shipton's famous picture was a hoax, *AJ* 1999) At

the back there are also some good photodiagrams and helpful appendixes, detailing every ascent that has ever been made (where we learn, for example, that as a nation we are second only to the Japanese in having the highest death toll - but there also seem to be some errors e.g. Alan Hinkes definitely got to the summit after Matt Dickinson.) There are also some minor errors in the main text e.g. I'm not sure that Dawson Stelfox will take kindly to hearing his achievement labelled as British (though he's correctly designated as Irish in the Appendix)

If the book has any really serious weakness, it is in the extremely uneven and generally poor reproduction of the photographs, which are of course a crucial complement to an anthology of this kind. Far too many of the pictures have a jaded, faded look, with an awful tendency towards too much cyan. In this context it is not entirely surprising to find that the picture of the north face of Everest on the back jacket has been printed back to front.

But the real strength of the collection lies in its multicultural variety. So, for example, we find Russian, American and Australian stories neatly juxtaposed and equally rivetting in their own very different ways (pp 130-151). The Chinese 1960 ascent is particularly interesting (as well as being totally convincing, in that all the details of the final section of the route tally completely with modern descriptions). When Liu Lien-man collapses, after climbing the Second Step with combined tactics, they hold an 'emergency meeting on the highest peak of the world' and decide to press on. And what of the gobsmacking Yugoslav account of the West Ridge Direct (surely the best route on Everest?), dating from way back in 1979 - Nejc Zaplonik climbing Grade 5 overhanging rock at 28,000 feet, continually falling off, with holds snapping, and him swearing: 'Oh, cursed be all the devils and every cloven-footed creature in the world!' Not quite your Anglo-Saxon four-letter expletive, is it? Or the Russian, Myslovski, unable to breath, hanging in space after a fall, and having no choice but to jettison his rucksack, 'ripping through my oxygen line and taking with it my spare gloves, cameras, ropes, karabiners, crampons, oxygen ...'

For all the cultural differences there are fascinating similarities. The hallucinations, for example. Frank Smythe in 1933 saw two 'curious-looking objects' like 'kite balloons ... but one possessed what appeared to be squat, underdeveloped wings, and the other a protuberance suggestive of a beak'. Krakauer imagined he was 'dressed in a green cardigan and wingtips'. Venables, solo, had an 'invisible companion, the old man ... together we moved forward, determined not to die.' And Bonington had Doug Scott and his father-in-law, Les: 'Doug and Les got me to the top of the Hillary step and disappeared ...'

The fascinating range of emotions as all these individuals reach the summit. Many cry: we find Bonington 'crouched in a foetal position', crying in 'great gasping sobs', and Hornbein and Unsoeld hugging each other 'as tears welled up, ran down across our oxygen masks, and turned to ice.' And the original, unalloyed enthusiasm of Hillary and Tenzing who 'shook hands and then ... thumped each other on the back until we were almost breathless.' Habeler and Messner in 1978 'sobbed and stammered and could not keep calm... we embraced each other again and again ... laughing and crying... After the crying

and the sense of redemption, came the emptiness and sadness, the disappointment. Something had been taken from me; something that was very important to me.... There was no feeling of triumph or victory.... I knew that I was standing on the highest point in the whole world. But, somehow, it was all a matter of indifference to me. I just wanted to get home now, back to that world from which I had come, and as fast as possible.'

Perhaps the last word should go to the Russian, Myslovski:

'Afterwards I would often be asked what I felt at that moment.

Happiness? Hardly.

Exhilaration? No.

Relief? Yes, to some extent.

Exhaustion? Maybe. I can't remember.'

With the dream gone, he gets down, and all he can say is: 'Now I had to find a new star to follow.'

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