Fallen Giants: A History of Himalayan Mountaineering from the Age of Empire to the Age of Extremes by Maurice Isserman and Stewart Weaver, with maps and peak sketches by Dee Molenaar. Yale University Press, 579 pp., $39.95

Maurice Isserman and Stewart Weaver’s authoritative history of Himalayan mountaineering, *Fallen Giants*, starts right at the beginning, 45 million years ago, with the collision of tectonic plates that threw up what the authors call “the greatest geophysical feature of the earth.” The Andes are the longest of the planet’s mountain chains, but the Himalaya and its adjacent ranges, the Karakoram and the Hindu Kush, are far higher. They contain all fourteen of the world’s peaks over eight thousand meters, or 26,247 feet; their northern rampart averages 19,685 feet—some five thousand feet higher than the Andes—and they are still growing. “To this day India plows into Tibet at the breakneck speed of five centimeters a year and lifts the Himalaya by as much as a centimeter.”

That little detail is characteristic of the book. Both authors are enthusiastic mountaineers who climb regularly in the United States and have gone trekking in the Himalaya, but they climb for pleasure, not for a living. Away from the hills, they are historians—Isserman has written extensively about American communism and the New Left; Weaver’s field is British imperial history and English liberalism—and they bring their professional skills and discipline to the subject in the form of meticulous research and a painstaking attention to detail. *Fallen Giants* is a big book in every sense—nearly 460 pages of text, eighty-five pages of notes, and a twenty-five-page bibliography—and the authors’ political take on the subject makes it unlike most other mountain histories.

Political historians do not usually bother with a subject as obscure and seemingly frivolous as climbing, although mountaineering books are now accumulating as relentlessly as the Himalaya itself. A mere half-century ago, mountain climbing was still a minority pastime for an eccentic few who took pleasure in doing things the hard way, in steep places and bad weather, and were willing to risk injury and death. It was a self-conscious, slightly antisocial activity. As a result, climbers wrote about where they had been and what they had done, but they wrote mostly for other climbers and a relatively limited audience of armchair adventurers who preferred to be thrilled, or to suffer, by proxy.

Not anymore. In the years since 1953, when Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay first reached the summit of Everest, mountaineering, rock climbing, and mountain tourism—aaka trekking—have been transformed into a mainstream leisure activity, indulged in by millions. Books about it figure in the best-seller lists and its needs are serviced by a thriving industry with an annual global turnover reckoned in billions; travel agents, commercial guiding outfits, and specialist manufacturers of everything from outdoor clothing, rucksacks, and tents to ice axes and arcane gear such as camming devices and offset nuts.

The Victorians were responsible for turning the Alps into what Leslie Stephens called “the playground of Europe,” but it was an exclusive playground for a limited few. One hundred and fifty years later, the Himalaya is in danger of becoming the playground of the developed world. As of August 1, 2008, 2,090 people have stood on the top of Everest. Both the South Col route that took John Hunt’s 1953 expedition six weeks to pioneer and the North Col route on which George Leigh Mallory and Andrew Irvine died in 1924 have been climbed from base camp to summit, solo and without oxygen, in less than seventeen hours. The mountain has also been climbed by a blind man, a teenager, and a sixty-four-year-old; it has been descended by skiers and snowboarders, flown down by paragliders, and flown over by balloonists. The problem with Everest is no longer how to get up it but how to dispose of the junk—the hundreds of used oxygen cylinders and tons of human excrement and waste food—that litters its flanks. In its official history of Everest, George Band, who was the youngest member of the 1953 expedition, calls it “the world’s highest garbage dump.”

Before the Victorians reinvented them as a form of recreation, mountains were of interest only to those unfortunate enough to live in them. In the Himalaya, they were holy places, a perpetual reminder of the gods—the Tibetan name for Everest is Cho-molungma, “Goddess Mother of the World” and their summits were forbidden to mere mortals. In Europe, superstitious Alpine peasants believed mountaintops were the abodes of witches, devils, and dragons. Lowlanders and people of sense chose to ignore the peaks, dismissing them as mere inconveniences—“considerable protuberances,” Dr. Johnson called them—put there to make life difficult for the civilized traveler.

According to Isserman and Weaver, the general change in European attitudes toward mountains began around the middle of the eighteenth century with the Gothic revival, the cult of the picturesque, and Edmund Burke’s aesthetic distinction between the Beautiful—the regular, the proportioned, the visibly predictable—and the Sublime—the dramatic, the unexpected, the awe inspiring—which thus provided a ready vocabulary for the novel experience of mountain wonder.

For aesthetes, appreciating the beauty of the Alps was altogether different from climbing them. When John Ruskin was invited to lecture to the Alpine Club in 1865, seven years after its foundation, he used the occasion to announce its members as Philistines: “You have despised nature [and] all the deep and sacred sensations of natural scenery… The French revolutionists made stables of the cathedrals of France; you have made racecourses of the cathedrals of the earth.… The Alps themselves, which your own poets used to love so fervently, you look upon as soaped poles in bear gardens, which you set yourselves to climb and slide down again, with ‘shrieks of delight.’”

Isserman and Weaver, being finely tuned to social distinctions and crushing British snobbery, interpret Ruskin’s diatribe as pure class consciousness. “His remark dripped with class condescension,” they say. I wonder. Ruskin had a talent for vituperation, but his venom on this occasion had nothing to do with “class condescension” for the simple reason that, socially, there was no difference between him and his audience. The members of the Alpine Club were professional men—scientists, doctors, clergymen, lawyers, soldiers, even a few writers—gentlemen who could afford to travel to the Alps and stay there for as long they pleased, just like Ruskin himself.

There were differences between them, of course, but temperament aside, they were differences of nurture, not nature. Ruskin had been privately educated at home by tutors, whereas most of the founding members of the Alpine Club had suffered the rigors of a board school education designed to train the right kind of men to administer the British Empire. A taste for strenuous exercise, adventure, and deprivation had been beaten into them along with Greek and Latin, and mountaineering was a perfect way of satisfying it. “The authentic Englishman,” Leslie Stephen wrote cheerfully, “is one who wanders all day among rocks and snow; and to come as near breaking his neck as his conscience will allow.” For Ruskin, art critic and lover of mountain landscapes, snobbery, of course, figured large in “the intensely serious-conscious eyes of the Raj,” far larger, in fact, than the mountains themselves, especially in the first half of the nineteenth century, when no sensible person dreamed of climbing them for pleasure. For Victorians, even a few writers—gentlemen artists, doctors, clergymen, lawyers, soldiers, even a few writers—gentlemen who could afford to travel to the Alps and stay there for as long they pleased, just like Ruskin himself.

The world’s mountains are still growing: “To this day India plows into Tibet at the breakneck speed of five centimeters a year and lifts the Himalaya by as much as a centimeter.”

The grandest of the early Himalayan expeditions, and also the least eccentric: the camp of Luigi Amadeo, Duke of the Abruzzi, and his team below the west face of K2, 1909; photograph by Vittorio Sella, ‘one of the greatest of all mountain photographers,’ from Maurice Isserman and Stewart Weaver’s *Fallen Giants*.

The survey was a triumph of doggedness, which you set yourselves to administer the British Empire. A taste for strenuous exercise, adventure, and deprivation had been beaten into them along with Greek and Latin, and mountaineering was a perfect way of satisfying it. “The authentic Englishman,” Leslie Stephen wrote cheerfully, “is one who wanders all day among rocks and snow; and to come as near breaking his neck as his conscience will allow.” For Ruskin, art critic and lover of mountain landscapes, snobbery, of course, figured large in “the intensely serious-conscious eyes of the Raj,” far larger, in fact, than the mountains themselves, especially in the first half of the nineteenth century, when no sensible person dreamed of climbing them for pleasure. For Victorians, even a few writers—gentlemen artists, doctors, clergymen, lawyers, soldiers, even a few writers—gentlemen who could afford to travel to the Alps and stay there for as long they pleased, just like Ruskin himself.

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calculated and the maps had been drawn, Peak XV was established as the highest of them all. In honor of the Great Trigonometrical Survey and its recently retired supervisor, they named it Everest.

For Westerners, the Himalaya and the once closed kingdoms that contain it—Tibet, Nepal—have always seemed enticingly strange: not only a romantically distant land with mountains twice as high as the highest Alps, but also a great blank sheet on which to project whatever fantasy one possesses. In the early days, merely getting there was a major undertaking: a five-week sea voyage to Calcutta, an eighteen-hour train journey to Darjeeling; then there were guides and interpreters to be hired, people to cook and clean and set up camp, columns of porters to carry the gear, and a six-week trek into the hills. For those not employed by the Raj, the Himalaya was the preserve of the very rich—or rather, of an exclusive subdivision of adventurers so rich that this hardship itself was an adventure.

They came in many forms and with varying degrees of eccentricity. At the turn of the century, for example, Fanny Bullock Workman, a formidable New England heiress, climbed a number of challenging peaks with her elderly husband—she died in “woolen skirts and hobnailed boots”—and set an altitude record for women climbers that lasted more than a century. At the turn of the century, for example, Fanny Bullock Workman, a formidable New England heiress, climbed a number of challenging peaks with her elderly husband—she died in “woolen skirts and hobnailed boots”—and set an altitude record for women climbers that lasted more than a century.

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style that they climbed in the Alps: casually and sportingly, in the spirit of adventure, and strictly as amateurs, with inadequate clothing—tweed and wool—and primitive equipment; Mallory used oxygen but would have preferred not to because he thought it was cheating. Like other members of the Alpine Club, he also disdained newfangled Continental gear like pitons and carabiners, "those conjoined miracles of simple technology," Isserman and Weaver call them, "that made possible the placing of points of belay on an otherwise sheer face." With equipment like that, steeper, more daring routes were possible, but it wasn't trench less climbing and it wasn't sporting, so they left the newfangled to Continental climbers.

The Germans had already climbed outrageously hard north faces in the Alps and now, in the wake of military defeat and the vengeful Versailles Treaty, they wanted to restore their national pride by climbing a major Himalayan peak. The 1928 team was led by Paul Bauer, one of Hitler's early converts, the mountain he chose was Kangchenjunga, and the route was brutal—harder and steeper than anything that had been attempted before. His team performed wonders, tunneling under ice caves when they couldn't pitch tents, and they seemed poised for the summit until the always unpredictable Himalayan weather suddenly changed:

A violent blizzard struck the ridge, pinned them down for three days, and finally forced them into a memorable death-defying retreat… but not before. Bauer had infinitely raised the technical standard of Himalayan mountaineering and restored to his own satisfaction the tarnished honor of his countrymen.

Bauer's example encouraged other climbers who had no taste for over-equipped, military-style expeditions.

Foremost among them were Bill Tilman and Eric Shipton, two free spirits who traveled light, climbed for pleasure rather than national glory, and were the first British climbers to treat their sport as a serious profession. Shipton's words, as "fellow mountaineers rather than servants." Tilman was a shy, taciturn man, famous for his spartan habits and austere philosophy; each expedition, he said, was "just a necessary preparation to anything that a man of courage can do. . . . I allow my person to be used to make films—all for an appropriate fee. My death is the only market value increases with every expedition run smoothly, culminating in the account of Hillary and Tenzing. The conquest of Annapurna by the French, followed three years later by British success (at last) on Everest by Hillary and Tenzing, were like Chuck Yeager's breaking of the sound barrier in 1947 and Roger Bannister's four-minute mile in 1954; they broke a psychological barrier about how much the human body could withstand and at what altitude it would cease to function. Before 1950, none of the eight-thousand-meter peaks had been climbed; five years later, twelve of the fourteen giants had fallen, though only to costly military-style expeditions in the old tradition, with teams of climbers long trains of heavily laden porters. It took another quarter-century, plus a vast improvement in gear, training, and technique, before Shipton and Tilman's casual, low-key approach to high-altitude climbing became the model for ambitious climbers. Twenty-five years after Hillary and Tenzing reached the summit of Everest, the great Tyrolean mountaineers Reinhold Messner and Peter Habeler repeated the climb without oxygen or fixed ropes, and in record time. Messner went on to climb all fourteen-thousand-meter peaks, many of them solo, including a solo ascent of the north face of Everest in strict Alpine style, carrying everything he needed—lightweight tent, sleeping bag, stove, and basic rations—on his back. Messner was just one of many moun
taineers supermen who arrived during what Isserman and Weaver call "The Age of Extremes" when technically difficult new routes were climbed in increasingly fierce conditions. Polish climbers set new standards for toughness and bravery by making ascents of Everest and other eight-thousanders in winter, when temperatures sometimes went to fifty degrees below zero. But "The Age of Extremes" was coming to an end, according to one of them, said, "Our life [in Poland] is so hard that for us Himalayan climbing is by comparison luxurious." That style of irony and self-deprecation were never qualities Messner aspired to. On the contrary, he was his own most enthusiastic fan:

"It is true what my critics say: my market value increases with every new supreme achievement, with every record and with every razor edged situation that I survive… I allow my person to be used for advertising, I give lectures and I make films—all for an appropriate fee. My death is the only thing that cannot be sold—at least not by me.

Such vanity set the tone for a new period of Himalayan mountaineering when the achievements of the climbers and difficulty of the routes began to matter less than the publicity they generated. By 1996, Everest had become a media circus, with eleven expeditions set up in Base Camp below the Khumbu icefall:

Five of the expeditions had their own Web sites. The Fischer expedition Web site was cosponsored by NBC broadcasting and was maintained on Everest by expedition member and New York City socialite Sandy Pettman. She was called "the great minder of the corps with virtually up-to-the-minute reports on the progress the expedition was making toward the summit, plus interviews with the climbers and photographs.

Mountaineering has traditionally been a pastime for misfits. Yet paradoxically, one of the pleasures of climbing is companionship, which old-timers do not prize. "The Age of Extremes" when technical skills and safety are worse than useless" and "anyone who has climbed to four thousand, is so hard that for us Himalayan climbing is by comparison luxurious." Here is an example of the new style spirit of the hills during the disastrous 1996 season on Everest in which eight people died:

Three Indian climbers were trapped high on the Northeast Ridge on May 10, and early the next morning a Japanese party intent on the summit walked past them, though they were still alive. By the time the Japanese descended, one of the climbers was dead, another missing, and a third barely alive and tangled in his rope. They removed the rope from the survivor but made no effort to help him down the mountain. He too would die. "Above eight thousand meters," one of the Japanese climbers offered by way of self-justification, "is not a place where people can afford morality."

Aleister Crowley would doubtless have been proud of them and Jerry Springer might have used them on his show, but their antics make a depressing end to a fine book by two mountain lovers with a strong sense of right and wrong.
We are Team On & we offer amazing holiday experience inspired by the Himalayas of Nepal, Tibet, Bhutan & India. Active-adventure or leisure-relaxed, our friendly staffs, group leaders & global business partners work passionately towards making your travel with us a mind-blowing experience. Welcome to the Himalayas! We are glad to offer you a journey of a lifetime.

1. Himalayas refer to a mountain range and not a single mountain. The Himalayan mountain range is the youngest on this planet.

2. Though they are the youngest, they are pretty old. They were formed 70 million years ago and were an outcome of same geological activities that have tore apart our continents over billions of years.

3. The Himalayas were formed when the Eurasian tectonic plate collided with the Indo-Australian tectonic plate (which has now broken down into the Australian plate and the Indian plate). The Himalayas are a range of mountains in Asia. The Himalaya proper stretches from the Indus river in Pakistan, through India, Nepal, and Bhutan, and ends at the Brahmaputra River in eastern India. The Greater Himalaya complex of mountains includes the Himalayas and some related ranges. On the eastern end of the Himalaya proper is the Hengduan Range, which includes the Three Parallel Rivers National Park in China. On the west, the Himalayas connect to a large area of high ground called the Pamir Knot.