In this brief note on the reasons, possibilities, and limits holding together—and evoked by—Himalayan mountaineering and its literature, I shall begin in a curious place: a windswept heath on which an aged Shakespearean king unexpectedly finds himself. I shall offer at the very outset that this story of reasons is also a story of reason, and the story of possibilities and fabulous aspiration also a story of great restraint.

I shall mark, as I go, the often peculiar origins of works of mountaineering literature, the defences needed for the literature and the activity it seeks to represent, and the emotional and psychological uses the literature is put to by the mountaineering community. I shall end with the heights, asserting that despite its essential loneliness (for to claim any kind of singularity is to be without company) and veritable refusal to translate experience into text (despite all claims that that is precisely what it aims to do), the most engaged—and to my mind most successful—literature of mountaineering seeks but to articulate its author’s profound sense of responsibility, and to perpetuate the very activity and fierce attraction that is its occasion in the first place.

Unaccommodation and the Making of Mountains

There is perhaps no question with which mountaineering literature has so relentlessly had to grapple with as that of justification. When old King Lear, himself helplessly exposed to a raging storm on the pitiless heath, sees Poor Tom beside him near-naked and profoundly vulnerable, he is suddenly moved to extremest pity:

Thou wert better in thy grave than to answer with thy uncovered body this extremity of the skies. Is man no more than this? [...] [T]hou art the thing itself. Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art.[t]

Poor Tom, with nothing and no one in the world for shelter, and utterly defenceless in the face of an elemental storm, induces a bewildered and aching sympathy in his royal companion. There is something unbearably pitiful about the unaccommodated human being whose only ability is to suffer. He will suffer until he is extinguished, and he will surely be extinguished. Perhaps it were better he were already in his grave. Lear’s contemplation of such a state of man—while he is himself unaccommodated—leads him into what, the play will soon tell us, is a tearing apart of his mind. That way madness lies.

To me, there seems to be a curious resonance, here, with the kind of perplexity and disorientation registered by the world that sees mountaineers at their mountaineering. It is almost a foregone conclusion that such a willingness—even desire—to be as unaccommodated as the high-altitude mountaineer on his/her mountain is, must be bordering on madness. Further, that too close a contemplation of the mountaineer’s repeated proximity to the edge of existence can perhaps engender madness.

But there are those to whom the question of why they go mountaineering where the levels of risk are high enough to make the exercise seem pointless, is itself pointless. George Mallory’s famous words about Everest, ‘Because it’s there’ (in reply to a newspaper reporter’s question in 1923), variously interpreted as flippant, exasperated, and profound, is nevertheless honest in a way that mountaineers almost a century
after find difficult to disavow.[ii] In fact, as David Robertson points out, a lecture Mallory prepared for the Broadhurst Theater on his fundraising tour towards the 1924 Everest expedition has a close and perfectly serious statement not far off being in the same temper. 'I suppose we go to Everest because—in a word—we can't help it. Or to state the matter rather differently, because we are mountaineers.'[iii] It is important to note a crucial element betrayed here about the mountaineer's commitment: he is unaware that by now he can make no distinction between the purpose and the agent. There is no mountaineer unless there is a mountain, but Mallory’s naming of his being a mountaineer as justification for mountain-eeing suggests the deep and complex engagement of the human agent with that which afforded him that agency. ‘We’ did not become mountaineers overnight. The mountains did that to the men. But now the mountaineers keep going resistlessly back (‘we can’t help it’). And that is how mountains get made.

In our day, such an idea can find easy and almost facile confirmation if we look, for instance, at the exponential growth of the tourist industry in higher Nepal (those indigenous to the lands had always lived within striking distance of the peaks, but it was with Western interest in the mountains that mountain-tourism grew in the region), but it is well to remember that Mallory was not the only man unable to tell apart the doer from the deed. Tenzing Norgay, back in Darjeeling after his whirlwind tour overseas following the success of the 1953 Everest expedition, looks at Everest from Tiger Hill in Darjeeling. He recalls pointing out to a group of American ladies long ago, as guides and travellers do even in the present time, the outline of Everest. ‘No, it is not that one,’ he had said. ‘That is Lhotse. Nor that. That is Makalu. It is the other one. The small one.’ This is a true enough statement, as from the south Everest seems unbelievably shy. Yet Norgay reflects on what a strange appellation he had used for the highest mountain on earth: the ‘small one’, he had said. But, he considers, there is also a peculiar aptness to it, ‘for what is Everest without the eye that sees it? It is the hearts of men that make it big or small.[iv]

Deep Play and Unfiltered Experience

Anthropologist Sherry Ortner advances the notion of ‘deep play’ to explain the impetus behind mountaineering.

[Clifford] Geertz had borrowed the idea of deep play from Jeremy Bentham, who used it to think about games in which the stakes are so high that it does not appear worthwhile to play the game—yet people play anyway. Geertz’s point is that people engage in certain forms of deep play all the time, not because they fail to recognize the poor odds or the nonutility of the game, but because such play pays off in terms of the production of meaning, of insight into important dimensions of life and experience.[v]

Aron Ralston, who on a short rock-climbing outing in Utah in April 2003 accidentally got his right arm trapped by a falling rock and in an almost superhuman exercise of will came out of the canyons five days later after having amputated his arm with his pocket-knife, alludes to the concept of deep play himself while writing up his experience and trying to reason why he continues to climb.

Deep play exactly described my winter solo fourteenner project [of climbing, over successive Colorado winters, all fifty-four 14,000-feet peaks in Northern America], especially when I would begin a climb by heading into a storm, accepting malevolent weather as part of my experience on that trip. Suffering, cold, nausea, exhaustion, hunger—none of it meant anything, it was all part of the experience. The same went for the joy, euphoria, achievement, and fulfillment, too. […] Mark Twight, an American alpinist with an extraordinary history of success and misadventure at the most extreme level of mountaineering, wrote in a climbing essay, "it doesn't have to be fun to be fun." Precisely.[vi]

The deep player knows the stakes, and is receptive to the creation of meaning generated precisely by the presence of those stakes.

Not all mountaineers or wilderness-venturers have such a clear theorization of why they do what they do, however. In this respect, it is instructive to look briefly at Chris McCandless, who died in Alaska in 1992 after having deliberately gone ‘into the wild’. Jon Krakauer, who maintains that McCandless was very far from being a fallow seeker after over-the-edge experience, is nevertheless deeply affected in the presence of McCandless’s mother, Bille. ‘I just don’t understand why he had to take those kinds of chances,’ she said. ‘I don’t understand it at all.’ Bille, Krakauer reports, ‘weep[s] as only a mother who has outlived a child can weep, betraying a sense of loss so huge and irreparable that the mind balks at taking its measure. Such bereavement, witnessed at close range, makes even the most eloquent apology for high-risk activities ring fatuous and hollow.[vii] But Krakauer, it soon becomes clear, is not so much invested in glorifying or even justifying high-risk activities as in reclaiming for McCandless an essential stability and affirmation of life.

There is a moving humility in Krakauer’s placing of himself, throughout his book Into the Wild, within the reader’s trust. He has undertaken the writing of it not because it is anymore an assignment from Outside magazine (he had honoured that commitment by January 1993), but because he finds in the boy’s story something of his own past, characterized as it was by a hungering after ‘unfiltered’ experience(s).[viii] He cannot, should not, and does not try to assuage the mother’s grief, which is itself a chastening reminder that every man or woman who knows to ask for and gets to experience McCandless’s kind of unalloyed examination of the self and lives to tell the tale (Krakauer places himself in this category), is already unbelievably fortunate. What he can and does attempt is to examine McCandless’s life to foreground what he sees as the young man’s capacity for affection and attachment to his family and the world around him, and argue for his appetite for life. The wild or mountainous or ascetic experiences of McCandless are movingly depicted not as renunciations of life, but explorations into its farthest bounds. With a mountaineer’s eye for detail, Krakauer stresses McCandless’s thorough planning and education of himself at every stage of his journey, and finally, his willingness to stop, take measure, and ask for help. The boy
might have had "itchy feet" (words reported of McCandless and documented in Krakauer's article), but he knew to and did look after himself. He had never planned to die. It is possible that this fact invests the young death with greater sorrow, but McCandless is right to see McCandless's efforts not as withdrawal or despair, but anticipative of and vindicating the pleasures and commitments of the lived world.

Unmixed Play

It was not always acceptable to express a desire for or even understanding of unaccommodation, however. The very option of saying, as Reinhold Messner today can, that the wilderness-experience is in fact a willed examination at the deepest level of the self ("I'm only interested in our experiences and not in the mountains—I'm not a naturalist[xi]"), is recent. The earliest expeditions often earnestly dressed up as ventures in geology, botany, medicine, and, of course, empirical exploration.[x] There had to be a 'use' to them—a 'use' rhetorically reinforced in the public arena—that made it at least possible for the wider world to feel that if there was loss of life on the mountains, it somehow contributed to a greater and more impersonal cause.

If Alfred Mummery's death on Nanga Parbat in 1895 came across as shocking, it was because it carried the sense of waste. There are photographs of Mummery with wife Mary and daughter Hilda in the 1890s—family portraits revealing domestic happiness. Shortly before leaving for the Nanga Parbat expedition in 1895, Mummery completed his collection of essays, My Climb in the Alps and Caucasus. The book, which combines fine writing with forthright enthusiasm for the sport, did very well. But the next edition did better still, with its prefatory material of extracts from letters written home by Mummery to his wife while on his final expedition.

In the letters, Mummery is on another of his 'climbs'. In the first missives, his enjoyment and awe in the great new lands are evident. It takes our distant hindsight to realize that the expedition was in fact dangerously underequipped and underexperienced for an attempt on a major Himalayan peak. But it is difficult not to appreciate the awe and wonder of men encountering, for the first time, scales and proportions beyond their wildest imagination. In a letter from 'Woola Lake', 10 July 1895, Mummery writes: 'As far as sketching goes, it licks any place I have ever seen: huge distances, blue hills, black masses of trees, and masses of cloud.' But the same letter continues, in a manner that can frighten a modern-day mountaineer, that 'as for climbing difficulties, there are no serious ones to encounter, and though the rarity of the air may bother us, it can't hurt us in any way.' The approach-march is full of anticipation of success. From Tashing, 17 July 1895: 'I don't think there will be any serious mountaineering difficulties on Nanga, and the peak is much freer from hanging glaciers than I had expected. I fancy the ascent will be mainly a question of endurance.' But as the camps move higher, an element of befuddlement, almost an amused one, begins to surface. 'There is no mistake about the rarity of the air, it touches one up no end' (4 August 1895). In the last letter dated, of 9 August 1895, there is the almost rueful admission that Himalayan mountaineering appears to be a very different prospect from what any alpinist could know. 'Taken all around, it is a great spree out here, but of mountaineering, as we know it in the Alps, there is little or none. [...] In this air one can't do more than three or four thousand feet in a day, and that means only going where loaded coolies can go. [...] The air is so baffling, and the sun is almost worse; it regularly takes all the strength out of one after 10 a.m.'

In the last letter (conjectured to be from 23 August 1895), there is the beginning of realization that there are heights greater than skill and enthusiasm. 'Our chances of bagging the peak look badly enough. [...] There is no doubt the air affects us when we get beyond 18,000 ft.' But even the final letter signs off affectionately and with some confidence. 'If the NW. side of Nanga is easy we may yet pull it off, but you will have a wire before this reaches you.[xii] In Mummery's own preface to his Climb, mortality had not even been considered.[xiii] He had playfully confessed his desire for 'unmixed play': 'I fear no contributions to science, or topography, or learning of any sort are to be found sandwiched in between the story of crags and seracs, of driving storm and perfect weather. To tell the truth, I have only the vaguest ideas about theodolites, and as for plate tables, their very name is an abomination.' [xiii] Later, these very admissions would prove instrumental in his being named as one of the first in a long line of people simply throwing their lives away in the mountains.

Today, when it is impossible to disguise a mountaineering venture under any other name, accusations of recklessness, selfishness, and even pure greed have multiplied against mountaineers from several directions. In the same way that the fate of widowed Ruth Mallory was publicly contemplated and bewailed after Mallory and Sandy Irvine walked into the high mists of Everest, in recent times, the husband and children of Alison Hargreaves have been exposed to intrusive public view. When their [Hargreaves and six other climbers had been killed in a storm after a successful summit attempt] deaths were reported several days later, [Jim] Ballard suggested to their children, then aged six and four, that they visit "mum's last mountain". Their arduous trip to K2 in the autumn of 1995 resulted in a BBC television programme, "Inside Story: Alison's Last Mountain" (9 Feb 1996), and Ballard's book, One and Two Halves to K2 (1996). Commentators debated whether the voyeuristic scenes of her grief-stricken children in bereavement counselling on the K2 trek were ghoulish or moving.[xiv] Maria Coffey's Fragile Edge (1989), written in an attempt to live through the loss of her lover Joe Tasker on Everest in 1982, poignantly poses the same questions, although her work does incorporate an attempt at understanding why Tasker could not stay put in the happiness and prosperity that he seemed perfectly capable of attaining in England. After the mammoth 1996 disaster on Everest (eight climbers were killed from simply being caught out on high in a storm), a New York Times correspondent queried that if the presumably noble element of "personal challenge" drove the climbers, 'why all the media coverage? Why the Web page?'[xv]

Selling a Kind of Freedom

Why indeed—for the question may be asked of all explicit publicization, and can soon boil down to asking...
why mountaineers write at all. [xvi] In most cases, for better or worse, we shall only find that most mundane reasons, that mountaineers need an income and physical subsistence just as other human beings do. In Tasker’s case, as for most professional mountaineers today, the literature of mountaineering is in order to enable further mountaineering. Tasker’s last job, for instance, before setting off for Everest in 1982, was to finish a book about his previous expedition. True, this symbiotic relationship between accounts of mountaineering and mountaineering itself has come to be widely established only in the last few decades, and those who understand and exploit it best also reflect on it with the clearest gaze. Ed Douglas writes of a knowing Stephen Venables: ‘Now finished with the Alpine Club he has returned to the curious life of a professional adventurer, selling a kind of freedom, meeting deadlines in a world marketed on spontaneity. The contradictions are obvious.’[xvii] But even as far back as 1922, John Noel knew of the potential public appetite for the exotic. Before setting off with the Everest team, he had already made arrangements for his camera film to be distributed at the earliest possible by Pathé Pictorial News. The expedition was not successful and came home to an equivocal welcome, but Noel’s filming with a Newman Sinclair camera at 23,000 feet and developing film in a wind-slapped tent at 16,000 feet, yielded results when the silent film Climbing Mount Everest opened to undisguised awe and great popularity among audiences across Europe.

Frank Smythe and James Ramsey Ullman, in the 1930s and 1940s, were similarly aware of and satisfied a public expectation of such tales of grandeur and intensity that could provide even second-hand or armchair travellers with a dose of adrenaline. It is another—albeit related—story that the commercial success of their books acted against them socially, for the mountaineering elite of their generation did not want much involvement of a general reading public in what was still a gentlemen’s pursuit. Things had been relatively safer in the 1920s; indeed, in Mallory’s time, the climbing circle in Britain was largely composed of or indebted to the Oxbridge intellectual circle.[xviii] Mallory kept company with Geoffrey Keynes and Hugh Wilson, Maynard Keynes climbed in the Alps, and even Bloomsbury participated in the occasional hike. This last is not surprising, as the founding members Adrian, Vanessa (Bell) and Virginia Stephen (Woolf) were children of the erstwhile President of the Alpine Club, Sir Leslie Stephen. Sir Leslie had written on the outdoor pursuits and mountains, and The Playground of Europe (1871) was widely read. It did not demean itself by carrying an undue inclusiveness or inviting a readership of people of all backgrounds. It was a gentleman’s account of a gentlemanly pursuit, and carried none of the tomfoolery of any professionalism.

People like Smythe and Ullman ended up rocking the gentle boat. Relating Smythe’s wide readership among the non-mountaineering public, Arnold Lunn and A. M. Snodgrass write that ‘an important result of Smythe’s commercial success […] was the disfavour that this brought in the eyes of the mountaineering establishment of his time. That he was not chosen as leader for any of the three Everest expeditions of the 1930s, in which he played so outstanding a part, must be put down primarily to this disfavour, which outweighed even the proven success of his leadership on Kamet.’[xix] Ullman’s High Conquest (which incorporated guidance in mountaineering techniques), and The White Tower (a work of fiction), were successful enough to earn him a membership of the American Alpine Club in 1941. He was praised for making a difficult sport accessible and engaging to even ‘workers and shop girls’ on ‘the subway and suburban trains’. But the noble pursuit of mountaineering had so far never been intended for workers and shop girls; in 1946, Harvard philosophy professor Robert Underhill encountered Ullman personally and soon wrote to the then American Alpine Club President Henry Hall about “a lowgrade New York Jew” who had “written a lousy book.”[xx] If such an entity was going to be allowed into the Alpine Club, where was he to look for any distinction between the gentlemen and the players?

Only, players often have the most interesting stories to tell. Norgay’s Man of Everest is composed in the wake of the distressing political ruckus (between clamouring ‘nationalist’ forces in Nepal and India) that Norgay found himself in after Everest, in order, as it were, to gain authorial control of his life. [xxi] Astoundingly, for an unlettered man, Norgay’s grasp of the sanction and authority that can be gained through print is acute, and there is something extraordinarily Miltonic in Norgay’s giving of himself, as he says, to his readers in this his book.

It may seem strange, but one thing I have many of is books. As a boy I never saw one, except, perhaps, as some rare thing in a monastery; but since I have been a man and gone on expeditions I have heard and learned much. Many men I have travelled with have written books. They have sent them to me, and though I cannot read them myself, word for word, I understand what they say, and they mean much to me. Now it means much to have my own book. A book, I think, is what a man has been and done in his life; and this is mine, here is my story. Here is myself.[xxii]

Mountaineers, then, write for a range of reasons. But as the story is more often than not deeply personal, even the claimed reason for writing (that someone who has not experienced the mountaineer’s situation might share in it) seems often defeated. No inclusion can in mountaineering literature be inclusion enough to enable a reader to go through text where he/she has not already gone physically, emotionally, or psychologically. What inclusion is attempted, is attempted through claims on the shared human experience of physical and bodily needs and contingencies. Mountaineers, because they know what it is to be unaccommodated, repeatedly articulate the value of accommodation. Because they operate close to loss, they take loss seriously. And those that know best to aspire—fabulously, extravagantly, limitlessly—know best to exercise restraint.

Finding Reasons: Finding Reason

Mallory is a good case in point to talk about a mountaineer’s knowledge of the irreversibility of loss. This is a fact easily forgotten in the wake of the continued mythologizing of him as the Everester under the spell of the mountain. In 1922, a sudden avalanche, while Mallory led a team of Sherpas only some 600 feet from the shelter of the North Col, carried seven of them off the far ridge. The mountaineering rope is a peculiarly
Mountaineers often live close to death. They usually do not die as long as they can see the fine line between relinquishing control and being in it. But it is a fine line indeed, and even the most experienced are susceptible to mistakes. Krakauer’s *Into Thin Air* is both a cathartic attempt to deal with a tragedy, and an attempt to understand why it should have happened at all. One of the biggest questions raised by the book is that of the unprecedented commercialization of Himalayan mountaineering—a commercialization that continues unabated. Of course, this question is by no means simply on Krakauer’s mind. Edmund Hillary, Chris Bonington, Joe Simpson, Walt Unsworth and David Breashears have all found in the rich tourist’s fixed-roped oxygen-cylinder-aided ‘Yak Route’ unavoidable anxiety. It is now possible to have ‘guided trips’ to the summits of even the highest mountains. A not terribly demanding level of fitness and a hefty budget (in the Adventure Consultants guided expedition led by Rob Hall, of which Krakauer was a member in 1996, the sum needed was $65,000), are all the requirements for admission into an aspiring expedition. Things are obviously not helped by the abysmally inefficient administrative policies of the countries home to some of the choicest high-altitude climbing in the world. Nepal and Tibet and several states in India have mountain administrations that work in desperate ways. One year they compete with each other in trying to draw the market and foreign exchange, and another they hike up the fees to the extent that does not deter the financially secure expedition but raises the stakes that much higher for less well-funded efforts.

Meanwhile, deforestation and non-biodegradable waste-pollution continue with far fewer checks than ideal.

Finally, there is no getting away from the gaze and judgment of the public. Krakauer’s account tells of how guides Scott Fischer of Mountain Madness and Rob Hall of Adventure Consultants were both keen to have him as part of their teams, as he was a contributing member of Outdoor magazine. This was advertisement that the rivals vied with each other for. But more alarming and distasteful to Krakauer, he reports, was Fischer’s ensemble’s inclusion of the socialite Sandy Pittman who was part of the team despite an evidently unsuitable temperament and health, because the agency that helped her ‘bag’ the highest of the Seven Summits would receive a share in her fame and fanfare. The business of the public gaze is one of the strangest in mountaineering literature. The genre is reliant on a certain kind of a jargon, a language and ideology all its own, and is in practice accessible only to those who, as it were, already know. But inevitably, in time of examination, it is the great mass of people outside the mountaineering community, most of whom have never tried to understand what it is like to function at an extreme and hypoxic environment, that weighs in with critical attention. Related, too, to the public domain of the judgment and the gaze is a voyeuristic interest sufficient to rival the greatest bloodthirstiness of large-scale gladiatorial sports of ancient Rome. The potentially fatal nature of the enterprise inevitably piques public interest, even of those that choose to be. In too many cases, the results are disastrous. Beck Weathers’s interview by *Turning Point* heard him saying that having Krakauer must have been an emotional pressure for both team members and the guides. The reporter would go back and tell his story to millions of people, and those on the mountain would later have to deal with the opinions formulated by these millions. There is no denying the curious validity of this. All readers of *Into Thin Air* know of Hall as a generous and even heroic figure who refused to leave his friend and client Doug Hansen even after having realized that Hansen was beyond saving. In the process, Hall paid with his life. The question remains, what would have happened if, after realizing Hansen’s fatal condition, Hall left Hansen to die? Surely, it would have made sense for him—and his wife and unborn child—to have saved his own life. But would he have escaped questionable critical attention upon return? Even had he been certain up there that he could have done nothing to help Hansen, could even he have been able, on return, to hold to that confidence, knowing as he did the unreliable decision-making powers of a hypoxic brain? One of Fischer’s guides, Anatoli Boukreev, who made several brave attempts at rescue on the fateful night of the storm but who lived while his team-members died, soon after descent received untold doses of media-infamy for precisely that reason.

In a strange but unavoidable way, the unforgiving arena on which high-altitude mountaineering plays out turns all decisions either black or white. Wisdom comes easily and uselessly after the event, knows Krakauer; he comes off the mountain to see Fischer’s sister’s incomprehension and anger, Neil Beidleman’s (Beidleman was working as a guide under Fischer) bewilderment and relentless wondering if he couldn’t have done more to help even one more life, an orphaned Sherpa’s bitterness over what he considers the curse and desecration of the land of his fathers, and his own continued sense of having perhaps contributed to the tragedy. But there is a point beyond which the search for reasons and justifications—however compelling, even necessary, they continue to be—begins to defeat the reason mountaineers return to their high places. And it is this last, the reason for repeated return, to which I wish to turn in the final section of my essay.

**Wild, Wonderful, Terrible**

After Mallory’s death in 1924, Francis Younghusband wrote of the mountaineer:

Perhaps he never exactly formulated it, yet in his mind must have been present the idea of “all or nothing”. Of the two alternatives, to turn back a third time, or to die, the latter was for Mallory the easier. The agony of the first would be more than he as a man, as a mountaineer, and as an artist, could endure.
Mallory went through exploration, elation, and exhaustion on Everest in 1921, went back on the 1922 expedition, endured some more of both joy and grief, and returned for the final time in 1924. Younghusband knew all this, and his lines are beautifully and poignantly written. Yet I cannot readily think of a more devastatingly dangerous set of sentences in all of influential Himalayan mountaineering literature. Perhaps it takes the view from 2012 to say so, but there is no mountaineer who cannot afford to fail, to ‘turn back’. If the mindset Younghusband attributes—I think unfairly—to Mallory is what a mountaineer sets out with, he/she is bound to fail, bound to not long be a mountaineer.

Nearly three decades after Mallory’s death on Everest, in 1952, Tensing Norgay and Raymond Lambert made an unspoken but unequivocal decision to turn back from a point higher than any man had been before (the Swiss expedition was Norgay’s sixth attempt on Everest). Norgay’s account unabashedly places the fact there, although no one who has not been in their position may be expected to understand the exhaustion or the dream of the moment. But that decision in 1952 allowed Norgay, in 1953, on the summit of Everest,
such a sight as I had never seen before and would never see again; wild, wonderful, terrible. But terror was not what I had felt. I loved the mountains too well for that. I loved Everest too well. At that great moment for which I had waited all my life, my mountain did not seem to me a lifeless thing of rock and ice, but warm and friendly and living.[xxvi]

For those of us that like to return to the mountains, mountaineering is not about finding reasons to go on, but about finding ways to return. I shall let a seemingly unlikely voice sum it up for me. Reinhold Messner holds forth to this day as a fierce guardian of the ‘impossible’. But climbers of my generation remember his registering as early as 1971 his vehement valorization of a strange aesthetic: the most serious drive is constituted by the acceptance of the possibility of defeat, and to even like it that way.

Put on your boots and get going. […] I’m already on my way, ready for anything—even for retreat, if I meet the impossible. I’m not going to be killing any dragons, but if anyone wants to come with me, we’ll go to the top together on the routes we can do without branding ourselves murderers.[xxvii]

Notes:


[xii] The concluding essay of the book, ‘Of Mountaineering’, allows that such an intensely enjoyable sport might carry some ‘danger to life and limb’. But when the author takes his leave of the reader, it is with a giddily joyous recommendation of the mountaineering pastime. ‘[H]appily to most of us the great brown slabs bending over into immeasurable space, the lines and curves of the wind-moulded cornice, the delicate undulations of the fissured snow, are old and trusted friends, ever luring us to health and fun and laughter, and enabling us to bid a sturdy defiance to all the ills that time and life oppose.’ Mummery, p. 379.


Some forms of publicization of mountaineering enterprises could be considered akin to titillation of the curiosity of the viewing public at home. The first publicist of the sport, a certain Albert Smith, who reached the summit of Mont Blanc in 1851, has curious things attributed to him. On his return to England in 1852, he hired the Egyptian Hall in London and set up arguably the first audio-visual mountaineering lecture with a magic lantern, a large screen, girls in Swiss costumes and some St Bernard dogs. Captain John Noel is later said to have brought back and lectured in Britain with a few Tibetan monks whom he had persuaded to join him after his surreptitious foray into Tibet when he had penetrated the country in disguise in 1913.

Ed Douglas, ‘History repeating itself?’, Climber (September 2008), pp. 29-31 (p. 31).

To this day the Cambridge University Mountaineering Club signs off each email bulletin with ‘CUMC—abducting freshers since 1905.’


See Isserman and Weaver, pp. 233-234.

The book is ‘Told to Ramsey Ullman’ (my emphasis). Norgay, in the years after Everest, travelled widely and came to speak several languages. But he remained all his life an unlettered man.

See Isserman and Weaver, p. 115.


Norgay, pp. 265-266.


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[This essay first appeared in The Himalayan Journal (2013)]

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