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 unlikely most other mountain histories.

Political historians do not usually bother with a subject as esoteric and seemingly frivolous as climbing, although mountaineering books are now accumulating as relentlessly as the Himalaya itself. A mere half-century ago, mountaineering was still a minority pastime for an eccentric few who took pleasure in doing things the hard way, in steep places and bad weather, and were willing to risk injuring themselves in the process. Since risk and the adrenalin high that went with it were an essential part of its appeal, climbing was regarded as questionable, slightly antisocial activity. As a result, climbers wrote about where they had been and what they had done, but they wrote for a relatively limited audience of armchair admirers of mountaineering who preferred 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 English snobbery," Leslie Stephen wrote cheerfully, "is one to wander 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, the Alps were "the playground of civilized travelers". Snobbery, of course, figured large in "the immensely status-conscious eyes of the Raj," far larger, in fact, than the Himalaya itself. The British Empire builders, the Himalaya was important as a natural frontier, a tool in establishing the boundaries of the Raj, "diatribe as a matter of class warfare." Snobbery, of course, figured large in ways of the Raj. For Ruskin, art critic and lover of mountain landscapes, the Alps were "the playground of civilized travelers". Snobbery was important as a natural frontier, a tool in establishing the boundaries of the Raj, "diatribe as a matter of class warfare." Snobbery is still important, but today 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, the Alps were "the playground of civilized travelers". Snobbery was important as a natural frontier, a tool in establishing the boundaries of the Raj, "diatribe as a matter of class warfare." Snobbery is still important, but today 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, the Alps were "the playground of civilized travelers". Snobbery was important as a natural frontier, a tool in establishing the boundaries of the Raj; 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 fervently, you look upon as soaked 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 distaste for mountain climbers as a class diatribe. His remark dripped with class condescension, "the playground of civilized travelers." The authentic English snobbery, says Leslie Stephen, was an interest only to those unfortunates 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 mountain tops were the abodes of witches, devils, and dragons. Lowland peoples and people of sense chose to ignore the peaks, dismissing them as mere inconveniences—"considerable protuberances," Dr. Johnson called them—but 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 visually 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 fervently, you look upon as soaked poles in bear gardens, which you set yourselves to climb and slide down again, with 'shrieks of delight.'"

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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 that 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—they did in “woolen skirts and hobnailed boots”—and set an altitude record for women climbers that lasted thirty years. Around the same time, the dottiest of all mountaineers, the infamous Aleister Crowley, aka “the Great Beast 666,” joined an attempt on K2 and lived up to his reputation as “the wickedest man in the world” by pulling a gun on a fellow climber.* The grandest of the early Himalayan expeditions, and also the least eccentric, was that of Luigi Amadico. Duke of the Abruzzi, in 1909. Amadico was an explorer, sportsman, accomplished climber, and grandson of the king of Italy. He brought with him a team of four guides, three porters, a cartographer, and a doctor, all of them Italian. He also brought with him 13,000 pounds of stores and equipment: everything from clothing and climbing gear to food and medicine, cameras, photogrammetric survey supplies, meteorological instruments, and more, all in seemingly limitless profusion. It was a vast load that required three hundred Ladakhi and Balti porters and sixty transport ponies to carry.

More importantly, his team included Vittorio Sella, one of the greatest of all mountain photographers, who immortalized the expedition in a series of brilliant, atmospheric pictures. The duke’s purpose was to climb K2; “the

*“Three years later, in 1905, Crowley led a disastrous expedition of his own to Kangchenjunga that resulted in four deaths. Crowley, who had heard their “frantic cries” when they fell, chose to stay in his tent: “A mountain ‘accident’ of this sort is one of the things for which I have no sympathy whatever,” he wrote. The next day he further reinforced his reputation for wickedness by climbing straight down past the scene of the accident without pausing to see if anyone had survived.

The Italian expedition was a model of style and efficiency but the duke had gone to the Himalaya in the same spirit as he had gone climbing in Alaska and the Ruwenzori—for the fun of it, for adventure, and without ulterior political motives. Not so the British, for whom Everest was a matter of national pride: a continuation of the Raj by other means. They had created an empire on which the sun never set, but their explorers had failed to reach the North Pole and had been beaten by the Norwegians in the race to the South Pole. That left Everest, “the Third Pole”: “Amundsen’s undisputed conquest of the South Pole,” says the authors, “and, even more, the poignant defeat and death in retreat of Robert Scott…seized the public imagination.” Everest had a great deal in common with the two poles: it was lethally cold and in its thin air every upward step required a physical effort no less relentless and exhausting than manhandling a heavy sledge across the polar ice. That made it an ideal testing ground for vertices the British valued most: fortitude, perseverance, and the kind of docile courage with which early explorers uncomplainingly suffered un-speakable hardships.

All those qualities were tested to the breaking point during World War I, then tested again at high altitude in the Himalaya. Everest offered “a few lucky survivors one more chance to die gracefully for their country,” and they did so in the same dogged way in which they had fought the war:

[Their plan in 1922] called for advance by stages, laying and stocking by stages, and for mindless obedience or stiff upper lips, nor for the cult of heroic failure and “the high rhetoric of empire and war [that] took over” in 1924, when the deaths of George Mallory and Andrew Irvine were made public and the two young climbers became “the glorious dead” and Everest “the finest cenotaph in the world.”

By the time he died, Mallory was on his third attempt at the mountain and knew how much hardship was involved. He was also in love with the place. For a climber accustomed to the Alps, the sheer scale of the great Himalayan peaks was irresistible: Everest is not just higher than Mont Blanc, it is almost double the height—higher by two and a half miles than the jet stream drops from 30,000 feet to 29,000 feet, Everest is already nudging higher in the sky than imagination could have seen a whole; we were able to piece together the fragments, to interpret the dream.

Were Everest “1,000 feet lower it would have been climbed in 1924. Were it 1,000 feet higher it would have been an engineering problem,” said Peter Lloyd, a member of another unsuccessful Everest expedition, in 1938. At 29,000 feet, Everest is already nudging the jet stream; if winter comes early the jet stream drops a centurion of feet to 26,000, the temperature drops with it, and the wind blows so fiercely that it is hard to move at all, let alone to climb. “The debilitating effects of high altitude that reduces the strongest to slow motion and makes even easy rock problems seem extreme. The ability to climb technically difficult rock at great altitude is a very rare gift even among experienced Himalayans for whom the simple business of moving upward, one exhausted step after another, is already a great test of courage, obstinacy, and true grit.

All the early expeditions had those qualities in abundance but the British wanted to climb Everest in the same
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 turned out to be the perfect 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 con- combined miracles of simple technology.” Isserman and Weaver call them “cheats that made possible the placing of points of relay on an otherwise sheer face.” With equipment like that, steeper, more daring routes were possible, but it wasn’t an easy life. And it wasn’t sporting, so they left the newfangled to Conti- nental 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 na- tional pride by climbing a major Him- layan. They had a team led by Paul Bauer, one of Hitler’s early converts, the mountain he chose was Kangchen- junga, and the route was brutal—bear- inger rather than anything that had been attempted before. His team performed wonders, tunneling under ice towers they couldn’t climb, dig- ging 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 mem- orable death-defying retreat…but not before Bauer. [Bauer] had indefinitely 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 Til- man and Eric Shipton, two free spirits and difficulty of the routes began with the achievements of the climb. The period of Himalayan mountaineering set up in Base Camp below the Khumbu icefall:

Five of the expeditions had their own Web sites. The Fischer expedi- tion Web site was cosponsored by NBC broadcasting and was maintained on Everest by expe- dition member and New York City socialite Sandy Pittman. She and Peter Habeler repeated the climb 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 para- doxically, one of the pleasures of climb- ing is companionship, which old-timers used to call “the spirit of the hills” and the French called une affaire de cordée: that is, two climbers roped together, each relying on the other, sometimes in dicey situations. It’s also expected to be fun, though no one ever went to climb in the Himalaya with that in mind. The mountains are too big, too high, too remote. Unlike the Alps, they have no strategically placed refuge huts, no cable cars to shorten the up- hill slog, and no comforts at all to allev- iate the squalor, drudgery, and sheer exhaustion of life at high altitude and in intense cold in a place where there is only rock and snow and ice, and noth- ing ever grows. In such harsh environ- ments minor tics become intolerable intrusions, and even the best of friends may end up enemies.

Once upon a time, the psychopathol- ogy of expedition life was a problem climbers kept to themselves. But man- ners change and these days, when travel is cheap and climbers go to the Hima- laya with as little fanfare as they go to the Alps or the Rockies, bad blood and outrageous behavior are the new fash- ion. They make good copy and help sell what Isserman and Weaver call “climb and tell” books in which “bruised feel- ings and simmering resentments were often begun to replace frostbite and hypoxia as the signature ailments of high- altitude mountaineering.” 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 sum- mit walked past them, though they were still alive. By the time the Jap- anese descended, one of the clim- bers was dead, another missing, and a third barely alive and tangled in his rope. They removed the rope from the survivor but made no ef- fort to help him down the moun- tain. 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.
The Himalayas separate the Indo-Gangetic plain from the Tibetan plateau. The Himalayas are among the youngest mountain ranges on the planet. According to the modern theory of plate tectonics, their formation is a result of a continental collision or orogeny along the convergent boundary between the Indo-Australian Plate and the Eurasian Plate. This is called a fold mountain. The Pir Panjal is a mountain range situated in the western part of the Lesser Himalayas extending from the east-southeast to west-northwest across the border of Himachal Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir. The sights are awesome: lofty peaks rising to the heights of up to 4,000 meters above the sea level, swift-flowing streams and deep-set valleys overgrown with cedars and scattered tiny houses surrounded by little fields.