

CHESS FOR THE BODY

The Library is a perfect Base Camp for members to read about someone else's mountaineering escapades, as [Rosie Thomas](#) discovers

The 1948 Romanes Lecture was delivered on 21 May in the Sheldonian Theatre, Oxford, by Lord Schuster, sometime Permanent Secretary to the Lord Chancellor's Office. The subject of Schuster's lecture however was unrelated either to matters of law or government. His lordship was a skier, a keen alpinist and past president of the Alpine Club, and his chosen title was Mountaineering.

The text of the lecture (to be found under Mountaineering in Science and Miscellaneous) is partly concerned with deploring nationalism in the sport, which given the date is hardly surprising, although not so relevant in this modern age of quests for the twin glories of extreme achievement and attendant publicity. Reinhold Messner, probably the greatest mountaineer of all time, might be taken as the embodiment of this more recent attitude. On returning from his oxygen-less solo ascent of Everest in 1978 and in response to a question about which flag he carried to the summit, he shrugged: 'I am my own homeland, and my handkerchief is my flag.' Whereas Messner's answer to the eternal question 'Why?' might be summed up as 'because I can', Lord Schuster concludes his address with some rather more sympathetic thoughts on the same topic: 'We cannot say what we found in [the Alps], nor how we ourselves were transformed in them. But we know that, after our struggles, our defeats and partial successes, we found rest and peace in the evening.'

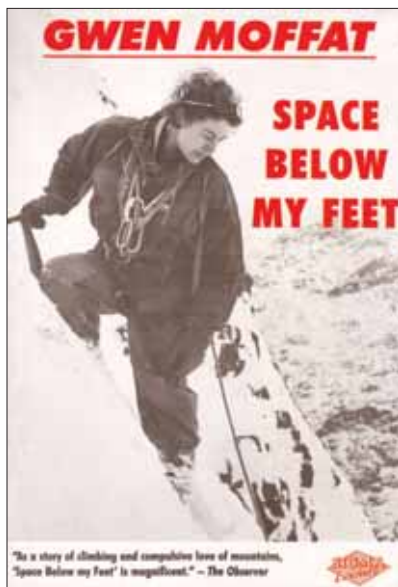


It is the pursuit of rest and peace in the evening that is the theme of my explorations in the Library's quirky Mountaineering collection. Given the actual restless night in the tent or hut followed by the pre-dawn stumble into outer darkness, and some aeon later the inevitable moment on an exposed belay with the cheek pressed to frozen rock, chips of ice and stone raining down from an invisible leader's infinitesimal progress up

Rosie Thomas near the summit of the Eiger.

the wall, when you offer up the mumbled prayer, 'if I can just get down from here ... *please* ... one piece ... never again ... I promise', what better alternative could there be than sensibly and cosily sitting down to read about someone else's escapades instead?

The Library provides a fine virtual Base



Above, left to right Gwen Moffat's *Space Below My Feet* (1961); Heinrich Harrer's *The White Spider* (1959), 2005 edition.



Camp for this purpose. The holdings in the subject are extensive, solid in most places, only occasionally shaky in others, like a riven Welsh crag. The armchair mountaineer will find in the Mountaineering stacks alone more than enough peaks and avalanches, glaciers, tweed breeches and *compagnons de cordée*, altitudinous feuds and séracs and magnificent Sherpas to occupy several seasons of winter ascents, even before investigating other shelf-marks.

Where to begin? Perhaps with one of the great classics of the genre, the riveting *Annapurna* (1952) by Maurice Herzog, the first man to conquer an 8,000-metre peak. Written from his hospital bed where he spent six months recovering from frostbite, this unaffected account of the 1950 French expedition, in which triumph was closely followed by disaster and eventual redemption, was a deservedly popular bestseller. It concludes with the second-best closing line in the genre, the luminously calm 'There are other Annapurnas in the lives of men'. (All right – the best? At the very end of Eric Newby's *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush* (1958), Newby and Hugh Carless bump into Wilfred Thesiger in a miserable village camp in the lower Panjshir. Getting ready for yet another night of privation the pair blow up their air-beds. "God, you must be a couple of pansies," said Thesiger.)

Other titles in *Annapurna's* we-made-it tradition range widely, including Lord Hunt's *The Ascent of Everest* (1953), solid but slightly pedestrian compared with the Herzog; Graham Brown and Sir Gavin De Beer's *The First Ascent of Mont Blanc*, an Alpine Club centennial volume (1957); H.W. Tilman's *The Ascent of Nanda Devi* (1937), in which he writes of reaching the summit with Noel Odell, 'I believe we so far forgot ourselves as to shake hands on it'; and my own greatest favourite, Heinrich Harrer's *The White Spider* (1959). This classic doesn't so much describe the first ascent of the Eiger Nordwand as haul the quivering reader up every successive ice chute and exposed traverse of the mile-high face. I first gulped it down as a teenager, and the words Hinterstoisser Traverse or Death Bivouac never fail to shiver the spine.

Almost more fascinating still are the various accounts of unsuccessful or tragic expeditions, because these tend to give more weight to the precise combination of bravery and selfishness that compels human beings to climb high mountains in the first place. (The entry on Mont Blanc in Murray's

Guide to France, 4th edition, offers the opinion that 'a large proportion of those who have made this ascent have been of unsound mind'.) For anyone who hasn't read the ultimate mountaineering survival story, there is Joe Simpson's *Touching the Void* (1988). I once sat on a plane out to Kathmandu next to a climber who was reading this book, and he couldn't tear his eyes from the page for long enough to lift his drink. Mislocating his own mouth, he poured a beer straight into his lap and went on reading, oblivious.

Elsewhere in this loose category there are various accounts of Edward Whymper on the Matterhorn, including an 1880 edition of Whymper's own *The Ascent of the Matterhorn*, published by John Murray. Some mountains take on an overpowering significance to certain nationalities, for example the Americans on K2, for which see Charles S. Houston, *K2, The Savage Mountain* (1954), the Germans and their war of attrition on Nanga Parbat, described by Hermann Buhl in *Nanga Parbat Pilgrimage: The Lonely Challenge* (1956), and the British on Everest. The key Everest years are 1924, with the deaths of Mallory and Irvine; the success of John Hunt's expedition in Coronation year, and the 1996 disaster that left eight climbers dead, including two highly experienced commercial guides. Books on these years and the intervening decades of events on Everest are thick on the shelves, with Peter and Leni Gillman's life of George Mallory, *The Wildest Dream* (2000), giving a good picture of the early ethos and idealism, and James Morris's *Coronation Everest* (1958), offering *The Times* correspondent's view from actual Base Camp. Unfortunately Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air* (1997), a cool and convincing account of the 1996 debacle, is not to be found. Finally, for an overview of the entire history of Himalayan mountaineering, don't miss Maurice Isserman's and Stewart Weaver's magisterial *Fallen Giants: A History of Himalayan Mountaineering from the Age of Empire to the Age of Extremes* (2008). It's got everything, from Aleister Crowley on K2 to

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the heartbreaking story of Nanda Devi Unsoeld on her namesake mountain, and a first-rate bibliography.

Contrary to the impression I may have given, armchair mountaineering need not be confined to the Himalayas or even the Alps. One of the finest climbing books ever written, I believe, is W.H. Murray's *Mountaineering in Scotland* (1947). Routes like Tower Ridge on Ben Nevis and Cir Mhor on the Isle of Arran are within the scope of the most knock-kneed climber, but Bill Murray's modest, affectionate, lapidary accounts of days and nights with friends in the wild places of Scotland make the accessible precious. Incidentally it's in writing about the Cuillin of Skye that Murray gives the recipe for the mountaineer's cocktail known as Mummery's Blood, consisting of equal parts Navy Rum and Bovril, served boiling hot. He claims that a pint 'lowers angles, shortens distances and improves weather'. One supposes it would. There are eight of Murray's books in the collection.

The Biographical shelves hold lives of the usual suspects, from Leslie Stephen through George Mallory to Chris Bonington, but there are less familiar names too. I'd recommend Gwen Moffat's *Space Below My Feet* (1961), on becoming the first female mountain guide, and *Two Star Red* (1961), about the work of the mountain rescue services. Al Alvarez's *Feeding the Rat* (1988), about the climber Mo Anthoine, is as essential as *Annapurna*. Alvarez has neatly described climbing as 'chess for the body', and the title of this comic retelling of climbing exploits in the authentic deadpan register ('it was so cold that his eyelids froze to his eyeballs') defines the compulsion to court discomfort and danger as easing the gnawing of an inner rodent. After an epic day on the Old Man of Hoy in the Orkneys, Alvarez is asked, 'How's your rat, then?' 'He overate,' Alvarez answers. 'I think he just died.'

In Biographical Collections, among other promising titles is Wilfrid Noyce's *Scholar Mountaineers* (1950). Alongside essays on Horace-Bénédict de Saussure and Goethe is 'Petraea Alpinista', in which Noyce identifies Petrarch as the father of mountaineering on the basis that he once climbed a mountain (Mont Ventoux) and then wrote about having done so, although he did not choose to repeat the achievement. Closer to home and the present is Bill Birkett's *Lakeland's Greatest Pioneers* (1983), describing the century-long gradual emergence of rock



Left to right: Howard Somervell, without trousers, Arthur Wakefield, and George Mallory, naked, after fording a stream en route to Everest. Photograph George Finch, 1922. © Royal Geographical Society.

climbing as a separate sport with different goals from mountaineering, and the local pioneers who forced more and more outlandish routes up sheer rock faces.

Elsewhere in the collections, Topography is another rich source of material. From the Caucasus through Tibet, and home again via Wales, wherever there are mountains there will be books about them. The sort of semi-aimless browse here, familiar to all Library users, brought me to *Tibet and Nepal* by A.H. Savage Landor (1905), a wonderfully opinionated and completely batty read in which he asserts that 'Any man who tries to go up a mountain by any but the easiest way is an idiot and should be confined to a lunatic asylum'. (So there, Reinhold Messner). For further mountain-related discoveries, various categories within Science and Miscellaneous – Botany, Natural History, Geology and Volcanoes – all repay an exploratory expedition. Even in Universities there is the original 1937 edition of *The Night Climbers of Cambridge* by 'Whipplesnaith', an engaging account of young gentlemen's stegophilic feats.

One of the jewels of the collection, however, is in Old Periodicals. This is a run of the *Alpine Journal*, the publication of the Alpine Club, the first of such societies to be formed. Subtitled 'A Record of Mountain Adventure and Scientific Observation' and dating from the first issue of March 1863, these were the days when peak-bagging was supposed to have scientific value as well as just being adventure for adventure's sake. There are fascinating hours to be spent here deep in the golden age of mountaineering,

not just for the club members' straightforward narratives of peaks, passes and glaciers, but for the ripe subtexts of class and empire: contrast this with the lives of men like Joe Brown and Don Whillans, who emerged from the working-class hard-men tradition of the northern mountaineering clubs some 80 years later. In Old Periodicals there are also some runs of *L'Echo des Alpes*, the parallel publication of the Swiss Alpine Club.

Finally, there are the overhangs and gullies of the Fiction shelves to be negotiated. Mountaineering features in a variety of novels, some with more merit than others, but *The White Tower* was a famous bestseller for James Ramsey Ullman in 1945. It contains the expected sex-in-a-sleeping-bag scene, for connoisseurs of the genre. There are four of Ullman's non-fiction titles in the collection but, sadly, not his novel. Other favourites that are held include *The Mountains of Madness* by H.P. Lovecraft (1931), wildly eccentric but eerie and oddly memorable even so, and the magnificent *The Ascent of Rum Doodle*, by W.E. Bowman (1956), a wicked spoof of some of the square-jawed narratives listed above, and one of the funniest books I have ever read.

On your eventual return to Camp I in Mountaineering, the ultimate choice to take back to the Base-Camp armchair might be *Mountains of the Mind: A History of a Fascination* by Robert Macfarlane (2003). This erudite, passionate book is part history, part personal memoir, and it is particularly enlightening on that essential mixture of bravery and selfishness, and the forever intertwined wonder and terror of mountaineering itself.

May there be rest and peace in the evening. And maybe also a beaker of Mummery's Blood somewhere to hand.