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Review of *The Summits of Modern Man: Mountaineering After the Enlightenment* by Peter H. Hansen

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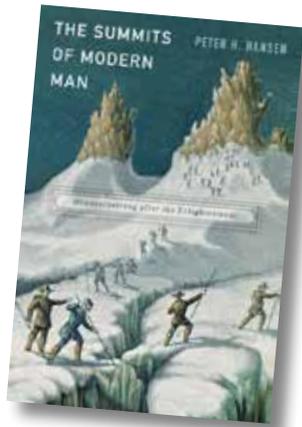
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The Summits of Modern Man: Mountaineering After the Enlightenment.

Peter H. Hansen. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013. 380 pages. ISBN 9780674047990.

Reviewed by Don Messerschmidt

This is a study of the sociological history and philosophy of summiting peaks in two regions of the world: the Alps, with most emphasis on Mont Blanc and the Matterhorn, and the Himalayas, focused on Everest. Of the book's ten chapters, eight are on the Alps (extensively discussed), one is about Everest (superficially), and one on the effects of climate change on glaciers, glaciology, and mountain research during the Anthropocene. Clearly, the author's focus on the peaks of Europe reflects his extensive study of philosophy vis-à-vis the Enlightenment and after. The book covers the last five centuries of Western history, though mostly since the beginning of the Enlightenment in the

mid-seventeenth/early-eighteenth centuries up to modern times. Its Western orientation reflects a primarily European penchant for climbing, worldwide.

Once into the heart of the book, however, it is clear that it is also about the culture and psychology of climbing. There is a great deal about the individuals who claimed to have achieved 'firsts' on selected summits of Europe, and on Everest, especially who they were in relation to their local or national origins, their association with guides and others, and their pride of accomplishment, true or false.

When Peter Hansen examines 'Who was first?' (chapter 4), the 'we' means 'modern man,' which refers, in turn, to European men, noting (as Hansen does) that female climbers came relatively late on the scene. When he addresses 'Why we climb?,' the 'why' reflects many motivations, including attitudes about 'conquering' summits. That outlook reflects something of the culture of modernity, emphasizing mastery by men and women alike in testing and overcoming Nature, as well as defining and reaching other challenges. For example, once the main summits were scaled, other thresholds have been sought, such as: first solo ascents, first female ascents, first alpine style climbs, first summits climbed on prosthetics, first blind climbers to the top, oldest summiters, youngest summiters, et cetera.

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Don Messerschmidt on *The Summits of Modern Man: Mountaineering After the Enlightenment*

Tenzing and Hillary came down from the summit in May 1953, Hillary is quoted as saying, proudly, that they had ‘knocked the bastard off.’ Then the question most asked was ‘Who was first?’, creating a political stir. On the one hand, it reflected the issue of national pride, and, on the other (as in the Alps), it had to do with the role of lead climbers vis-à-vis their guides or local companions. Was it Hillary the climber with Tenzing as his helpful companion? And was it Hillary representing Great Britain while Tenzing represented Nepal or India? (Both countries claimed his allegiance.) And, not least, which of them was first on the summit (and, inevitably, why that one?). Hillary put that issue to rest by saying that he and Tenzing had reached the top ‘almost together’ (chapter 9). But, behind it all was the question of its fundamental meaning, both philosophically and politically, from alternate perspectives.

Questions such as ‘Why be first?’ are also raised and thoroughly documented and discussed in the book. The ‘why’ is rooted in many ambitions, such as climbing for personal fame and glory, financial reward, quest for knowledge, mastery over Nature, liberation from fear, establishing sovereignty, or other forms of chauvinism including national or ethnic pride. For example, the Everest case demonstrates elements of sovereignty and national pride (even colonialism) vis-à-vis issues of accessibility to the mountains due to the fluctuating

political machinations of Nepal, India, and Tibet in the first half of the last century, when the British (Malory, et al) were attempting to scale it.

Early in the book, after laying the groundwork of the Alpine summit ‘firsts,’ Hansen delves into such philosophical notions as ‘thinking like a self,’ ‘thinking like a state’ and ‘thinking like a mountain.’ While questions of who, when and why on the summit are also discussed early in the book, he goes on to stretch the topic to include rituals of climbing, religious symbolism and imagery, ceremonies of possession, commemorative events, and formal proclamations on or about peaks. Along the way he also addresses the meaning of ‘facts’ about summits, and why ‘modern man’ is so fixated on scientific truths. These discussions are among the most important in the book.

Peter Hansen has written about mountains from a philosophical-historical viewpoint for over two decades. This book is a culmination of his studies, and though it was published in 2013, it is not dated. The issues he examines are as old as modernity and the Enlightenment, but they remain fresh and significant for post-modern scholars.

For scholars and others keenly interested in summit affairs from so many perspectives, this is a valuable book. Its main focus is on understanding the importance of peaks and summits—mountain geography—and the rationale

for climbing mountains from the perspective of the history of philosophy and national identity in Europe. This is clearly Hansen’s principle expertise, and he is very thorough.

He is obviously most familiar and comfortable with many centuries of Europeans ‘conquering’ the Alps and how that has worked to define the identity of specific individuals and institutions, communities and nations. But his analysis of climbing Everest as an extension of Western conquest is lacking. There is so much more to be examined across the high backbone of Asia, along the entire span of the Himalayas, the Hindu Kush, and the Pamirs, where issues of national and ethnic pride are especially prevalent. Perhaps an Asian scholar knowledgeable of the history, philosophy, politics and cultures of Asian area summiting will take it on, expanding the issues and providing fresh scholarly perspectives.

Don Messerschmidt is an anthropologist with a lifelong interest in human history and cultural expressions in the Himalayas. He has taught in several universities in North America and in Asia, and now, in retirement, he writes about the Himalayas for popular publications, leads culture-oriented tours and treks in Nepal and Bhutan, and consults on the application of social science and the concept of culture to rural and natural resource development.