

Peak Pursuits: the emergence of mountaineering in the nineteenth century by Caroline Schaumann, London and New Haven, Yale University Press, 2020, 384 pp., 35 b-w illustrations, £26 (hardback), ISBN 9780300231946 Mike Huggins Edit
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The complex encounters between people and mountains have attracted a very substantial literature, with well over 2000 books on mountaineering in the British Library alone. This is a sensitive and well-written addition to the genre. Caroline Schaumann is a professor of German Studies who approaches her topic through insights drawn partly from literary analysis and criticism, but also in a strongly interdisciplinary way, studying the liminal mountain world through perspectives that range across cultural history, art history, sociology, tourism, gender, philosophy, and geography. Her book is not a standard history of rock climbing but rather a transnational view of the nineteenth-century emergence of mountaineering via the writings and artistic and photographic depictions associated with eleven richly-diverse individuals drawn from Britain, Europe and North America, in a subtle and highly nuanced way. Each writer is chosen because he had a significant influence on future global cultural understandings of, and discourse about, mountain exploration and climbing.

It is written in three parts, developed chronologically. Part I's two chapters explain the contributions of Prussian scientist, naturalist, and humanist Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859), who explored first the Alps, and later the Andes. This is a topic which Schaumann has already made her own through her earlier scholarship. She shows how early nineteenth-century mountain explorers, products of the Enlightenment, were drawn there for a range of reasons: some scientific, searching for

minerals and plants, or studying glaciers and geology, others drawn by Enlightenment ideals of sublime reverence, pleasure, and aesthetics. Part II begins with a short overview of the Alps. It then deals with the lives, achievements, and cultural productions of eight Alpine mountaineers in detail, beginning with Horace-Bénédict de Saussure, the privileged Swiss aristocrat, physicist, and Alpine traveller, often considered the father of Alpinism, who died in 1799, but whose writings sparked people's imaginations. Edinburgh scientist James David Forbes (1809–1868) made the first British ascent of the Jungfrau with Professor Agassiz whilst studying glaciers as early as 1841. During the so-called 'golden age' of mountaineering (c.1850–1865), the journalist Albert Smith ascended Mont Blanc in 1851. His later presentation of his ascent at London's Egyptian Hall ran for 2000 performances. In 1854 Alfred Wills, a barrister, climbed the Wetterhorn (on his honeymoon). By 1865, when explorer, author, and mountaineer Edward Whymper made a first ascent of the Matterhorn, forty major peaks had been ascended by British middle-class amateurs, whose images of conquest dominated Alpine Club writings. His contemporary and rival John Tyndall had a more major impact on the changing representation and production of the sport through his writing, simultaneously scientific, passionate, physical, and poetic. Leslie Stephen (1832–1904) another prominent figure, who regularly climbed with a Swiss guide, produced a classic text, *The Playground of Europe* (1871) and encouraged the modernist move towards rock climbing and movement on rock instead of first ascents.

Part III explores the American west, which became a new focus for mountaineering, especially after the Canadian Pacific Railway opened up the Rockies, a supposedly authentic wilderness, after 1885. It shows how Clarence King drew on European traditions and 'helped promote a gendered American heroism' (259), while John Muir synthesised and expanded existing work by writing himself into nature as an environmental philosopher.

It is unavoidably largely a history from above. All the writers marketed their work to readers who could afford to travel to mountain locations or vicariously experience the risks, challenges and experiences of mountaineering. Like their customers, writers were white, male, and middle-class, with highly-gendered expectations, often also forming part of the broader construction of nationalist and imperialist mountaineering identities. The many working-class guides who gave very substantial assistance to summit trips, finding routes, and carrying equipment, were

often (but not always) marginalised in published work. Schaumann shows, too, how Clarence King's constructed narrative of climbing achievement was very much 'bound in the political, racial and ethical ramifications of the frontier experience' (p. 234) while Muir likewise failed to make any acknowledgement of the rich cultural history of indigenous peoples.

Given Schaumann's strong background in feminist theory it is surprising that mountaineering women play a relatively marginal role in her book. It would have been interesting, for example, to have included a chapter on Elizabeth Le Blond (1860–1934), whose mountaineering activities in the Alps and Norway, and her early engagement with climbing photography, gave her material for eight books.

There is much current interest in the preservation of mountain and climbing heritage, and this book is a fitting reminder of key figures who helped to shape these, placed in a wider context of cultural, social, and historic trends. This complex and detailed study demands close reading, but it repaid that by extending my own understandings. Summarising complex ideas about such mountaineers can be elusive, but Schaumann's text is informative, the images fascinating and together they provided a satisfying intellectual and aesthetic experience for the reader.