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The Summits of Modern Man: Mountaineering after the Enlightenment

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The Summits of Modern Man: Mountaineering After the Enlightenment is both a more narrowly focussed and a more widely cast book than its title would suggest. The core of the work focusses on one physical mountain, and the activities which took place upon and around it from the 18th century onwards: Mont Blanc, the white mountain, and the highest peak in Europe. However, as Peter Hansen seeks to establish, the top of Mont Blanc encompassed a variety of different ?summit positions?, contested, debated, and redefined throughout the centuries. In the course of this ambitious work, Hansen considers everything from papal mountain-visits to bronze statues of early climbers, covering a time-space from the early 17th century to the mid 20th. Such impressive range is both one of the strengths and one of the weaknesses of this volume.

The opening chapter, ?Beginnings?, introduces a key issue: the mythology of the sole claimant of the mountain summit, and the (according to Hansen) post-Enlightenment fascination with the question, ?who was first?. As Hansen observes, mountaineering is, in spite of the mythos, innately a group activity: when someone is ?on belay?, regardless of whether they are the lead climber or the belayer standing below, they are linked and reliant on the presence and attention of another human being. No mountain is really climbed

by an individual. However, the desire to place a single person in the ?summit position? is strong, a point which Hansen illustrates with discussion of Petrarch?s ascent of Mont Ventoux, considered by many to be the ?first? example of ?modern? mountaineering. However, he emphasises that such definitions (both of ?being first? and of ?modernity?) are by no means simple ones.

The second chapter, ?Discovery of the glacières?, considers the ?discovery? of Mont Blanc by Richard Pococke and William Windham, among others, and discusses early natural histories of the Alpine regions, such as Johann Jakob Scheuchzer?s *Iterina Alpina* (1708). Chapter three, ?Ascent and enfranchisement?, introduces the reader to the first ascent of Mont Blanc, and the events leading up to it. Hansen argues that ?Ascents of Mont Blanc from Chamonix were entangled with *affranchissement*, the emancipation from feudal dues in Savoy? (p. 63). The first ascent, by Doctor Joseph Paccard, the son of a notary and proponent of enfranchisement in Savoy, and Jacques Balmat, a crystal-hunter, certainly brought to the foreground issues of social status and power. It also, as the title of chapter four suggests, marked the beginning of the debate of ?Who was first?? This debate, as subsequent chapters reveal, rumbled on throughout the centuries, but in the immediate aftermath of the ascent the focus was on conflicting claims of priority between Balmat (described in some accounts as dragging the weakened doctor to the summit) and Paccard (described in others as so energetic that he raced Balmat to the top). Early visual memorials of the pair solved the issue by imbuing them with very different, but equally valuable qualities, with Paccard presented as the ?reflective savant? and Balmat as the ?energetic man? (p. 107). In the end, Paccard failed to achieve priority even as a scientist; later in the 18th century, it was Horace-Bénédict Saussure, the third person to ascend Mont Blanc, who was lauded for his scientific observations from the physical ?summit position?.

Chapter five, ?The Temple of Nature?, considers Mont Blanc and the surrounding area in the final years of the 18th century and the early decades of the 19th. It charts the conception, creation, and occasional restoration of the eponymous temple built at Montanvert, which served both as a refuge to visitors and as a memorial of sorts to the early ascendants of Mont Blanc. This chapter also seeks to place Mont Blanc within the context of the French and Genevan Revolutions, considering the rise and fall in popularity of mountain imagery in the last decade of the 18th century. It also recounts the first recorded ascent of Mont Blanc by a woman, Marie Paradis. The following chapter, ?Social climbers?, brings the narrative into the mid 19th century, charting the 1820 avalanche disaster which cost the lives of three guides, the subsequent formation of the Company of Guides of Chamonix and the protective regulations it brought in, Jacques Balmat?s hunt for gold towards the end of his life, and the second female ascent of the mountain by Henriette d?Angeville. The latter episode is of particular interest in that both d?Angeville and her contemporaries came to view her as ?first? because Marie Paradis, the prior claimant, was allegedly ?dragged? to the summit (p. 173).

Chapter seven goes on to consider the ?Age of conquest? which took place as mountaineering in the Alps increased in popularity. It deals briefly with issues of nationalism in the Alps, astutely noting that although the first Alpine Club was founded in London, ?British climbers never had the peaks to themselves? (p. 186). It also discusses the first of two Chamonix monuments to the early ascents, the 1887 Saussure and Balmat monument. As Hansen reveals, the debates surrounding the relative placement and body language of the two figures were underlain by continuing tensions regarding the relative importance and priority of guide versus savant. Chapter eight, ?History detectives?, deals with continuing revisions made to the story of the first ascent(s), from the ?recovery? of Dr Paccard by Edward Whymper in the 1890s, to the 1934 film *Der ewige Traum* (The Eternal Dream), which gave the story of Balmat and Paccard a cinematic re-telling.

Chapter nine, ?Almost together?, shifts the focus of the book geographically to the first ascent of Mount Everest in 1953. Hansen suggests that the very same debates surrounding ?who was first? which had fueled the Paccard-Balmat controversy could also be seen in the reception of Hillary and Norgay as Nepal, India, Britain, and New Zealand all applied different judgements of priority to the two individuals. The final chapter, ?Bodies of ice?, discusses the key discoveries found in or drawn from glaciers since the early 19th century, from the bodies of the 1820 avalanche victims to evidence for climate change. It also features an account of the 1986 bicentennial celebrations of the first ascent and the compelling image of ?the Pope on Monte Bianco? (p. 283), and touches upon recent debates in environmental thinking, namely whether or not the geological period we now exist in is the ?Anthropocene? ? a period of human-led climate change.

Hansen concludes by reflecting on the impossibility of ever identifying an individual as ?first? at anything, be it being modern, or being atop a mountain.

The Summits of Modern Man is an ambitious book. Excluding the chronological outlier of Petrarch (a figure any historian of mountaineering must grapple with), Hansen treats in detail an approximately 250-year span, from Pococke and Windham?s glacial ascent to the late 20th century. Its sources are wide-ranging, from letters to films. Hansen?s use of visual sources is of particular merit. He also simultaneously seeks to tell two different historical stories ? how first ascents (be they by Paccard or Paradis) came about, and more importantly, how they were then re-interpreted over time and subsumed by what Hansen envisages as the post-Enlightenment mythology of the individual ?summit position?. However, it is in its very ambition that crevasses, as it were, threaten to mar *The Summits of Modern Man*.

Wishing there was ?something more? in an already extensive book may seem a little churlish, and reviewers can fall into the trap of complaining at the absence of something which was not, in fact, within the book?s declared remit or touched upon by the author?s intentions. However, among the quite significant absences in *The Summits of Modern Man* is one which makes it very difficult for the reader or the reviewer to gain a clear sense of Hansen?s aims or overall argument: it lacks a formal introduction. The first chapter certainly has an introductory overtone to it, easing the reader into the eponymous ?Beginnings? of mountain-climbing with its discussion of Petrarch on Mont Ventoux. Its initial pages do provide a subtle road-map to the work, and Hansen declares that ?this book seeks to explain a particular strand of modernity in which modern man stands alone on the summit...? (p. 2), and proffers the broad argument that mountain climbing did not *emerge* from ?modernity?, but was instead ?one of the practices that constructed and redefined multiple modernities during debates over who was first? (p. 3). At the end of chapter one of *The Summits of Modern Man* one understands that the issue of ?who was first? ? and the validity of that question ? is to be key, and has been introduced to some of the early figures in mountain climbing and description, such as Petrarch and Conrad Gesner. However, one does not have an entirely clear sense of Hansen?s argument, and is left with no sense at all of his methodology or the reasoning underlying his choice of sources. For an academic reader this is a serious problem.

The concluding chapter displays a similar pattern. Hansen?s closing sentences are eloquent, and leave the reader to reflect on the nature of modernity, individual sovereignty, and inter-connectedness. However, this final chapter neither summarises nor analyses the evidence laid out previously, and the academic reader, whilst appreciating the fascinating and compelling nature of the evidence presented, may regret the lack of further analysis regarding its historical significance, or further explication of the important idea that narratives both of ?being first? and of ?being an individual at the summit position? are based more on myth than reality. Finally, and once again frustrating its potential as a resource for academic readers, the work lacks a bibliography, and the full citation for a given text appears to be provided only in the first instance (rather than in the first instance per chapter), making it difficult when using the book alone to chase a specific source. However, and to Hansen?s credit, both a bibliography and further illustrations are freely available online; a resource with which any interested reader should certainly become acquainted.(1)

Another bemusing absence is the lack of source interrogation at various points throughout the book. The first chapter discusses in detail the historiography surrounding Petrarch?s account of ascending Mont Ventoux, and touches upon doubts regarding the extent to which the account was shaped less by actual events and more by Petrarch?s self-fashioning (p. 21). This clearly indicates a willingness to go beyond simply taking statements in historical sources at face value, but similar analysis is notably absent elsewhere. For example, Hansen recounts a confrontation between Balmat and Paccard in 1787 in which Paccard ?struck him [Balmat] between the eyes with his umbrella? (p. 99). As is evident upon turning to the endnotes, this incident was recounted in an 1839 letter written by one Gédéon Balmat, presumably a son, grandson, or other junior relative of Jacques Balmat. Much could be made of the potential dissonance between the events as they occurred and the account given of them over 50 years later. This may be a symptom of judicious editing ? *The Summits of Modern Man* covers an impressive period and range of issues within a limited word-count ? but it is important to point out where sacrifices to space seem to have been made, and where they occasionally leave the reader and historian with more questions than answers.

More problematically, some readers may question both Hansen?s use of theoretical terminology and the analytical connections which he draws between phenomena and ideas. Theoretical or metaphorical terminology can, if overused, risk losing their meaning or confusing the reader, particularly when they are not glossed or explained in plain language upon their first instance in the text. ?Time knots?, ?thresholds?, and ?summit positions? abound throughout the text, used in such a wide variety of contexts (Paccard apparently achieved the ?summit position? in local politics (p. 123) in addition to ? contestedly ? gaining it on Mont Blanc) that it becomes hard to keep track of what exactly they are intended to relate to. When Hansen does gloss metaphorical concepts, he sometimes does so with reference to so many other dense terms that his meaning remains elusive:

> Consider ?thinking like a mountain? a metaphor for the network of intersubjective relationships between people and the natural world, spiritual forces, and other people that are not reducible to solipsism of thinking like a self or the system-building abstraction of thinking like a state (pp. 27?8).

Perhaps the use of such terminology was once again hampered by a practical desire to avoid extending an almost 400-page monograph to 500. It could certainly be wished that Hansen had taken such terms ? which he utilises in a novel fashion ? one step further, and defined and unpicked them just a little more.

On the other hand, it could be argued that in some of the connections Hansen draws he goes further, perhaps, than the evidence presented truly supports. For example, in discussing the ?Temple of Nature? in chapter five, Hansen notes that it was physically on the ?edge of a cliff?, before going on to claim that ?The Temple of Nature also stands at the limit of normal theoretical terrain?. Hansen then uses this as a spring-board to consider other metaphorical cliff-edges, such as those encountered during the Napoleonic and revolutionary eras in France (119-120). The mountain imagery used in revolutionary discussions at the time is clearly relevant, and that the two events (the celebration of early ascents of Mont Blanc and revolution) occurred at the same time helps to contextualise them both, but whether the two are as linked as Hansen seems to hint by moving seamlessly from the physical to the metaphorical cliff edge is questionable. The final chapter likewise glides between discussing human remains discovered in glaciers, and the evidence preserved in the same ice attesting to the slow retreat of said glaciers, or, as Hansen puts it, ?bits of wood rather than pounds of flesh? (p. 276). This then presages a discussion of the Anthropocene, the concept that the era which we now inhabit is one in which humans are a major factor in environmental change. Although this is an important issue in environmental history, it is also a rather huge point to raise in a concluding chapter which does not, arguably, serve to draw the rest of Hansen?s arguments together. Finally, Hansen gives pride of place at the conclusion of his work to Ötzi the Iceman, who died in the Neolithic period and was discovered in 1991, and who is, in keeping with the (excellent) pun of the chapter title, one more ?body of ice?. Hansen uses him to question our ideas about the ?first modern man? (p. 302), but it is difficult to see what he adds to

our understanding of mountaineering and debates about primacy which took place on the peaks above his final resting place long after he had died and before his existence was ever known. Such ?links? as these raise more questions than answers.

None of this is to say that the work is without considerable positive qualities. The illustrations throughout are well-chosen and Hansen?s use of them within the text is highly skilful; indeed, his analysis both of these images and of the film *Der ewige Traum* are evidence of his skill and confidence in dealing with visual evidence.(2) As previously noted, it brings together a vast array of both primary and secondary sources, and introduces a variety of incidents and figures from the history of mountaineering, both more and less well known. Hansen has a strong narrative style and the reader is carried smoothly through almost 300 years of history. Chapters eight and nine are particularly strong, and Hansen?s analysis of the reception of Hilary and Tenzing after the first ascent of Everest demonstrates a firm and nuanced understanding of the political and national peculiarities of the event, in which Britain claimed the ?conquest? of a mountain summited by a New Zealander and a Sherpa.(3) Harvard University Press (laudably) prices its books relatively low, meaning that they are affordable to the general reader and not just institutional libraries or researchers with the benefit of a book grant. Given its timely release ? coinciding with the 60th anniversary of the first ascent of Everest ? and its fascinating subject matter, *The Summits of Modern Man* is sure to attract the mountaineering enthusiast keen to delve deeper into the history of their sport. Such readers would close the book not only enlightened about the historical context of mountaineering, but also inspired to reflect upon the contested reality of the ?summit position? which so many climbers seek.

All in all, *The Summits of Modern Man* is a thought-provoking, but occasionally problematic work. It is clearly the result of wide-ranging archival research, and within it Hansen deals with an impressive sweep of historical events and issues raised by secondary literature. There are, indeed, several books within this single tome. The development of the idea of the Anthropocene, and the post-Everest reception of Tenzing and Hillary, deserve volumes or at least articles all of their own (Hansen has already written the latter; readers can but hope he will soon also tackle the former). However, it is in its range and ambition that *The Summits of Modern Man* falls down in some areas. The lack of space dedicated to the introductory ?nuts and bolts? of methodology and source discussion, analytical ?next steps?, and glossing and explanation of technical terminology and metaphorical ideas might be felt sorely by some readers, and diminishes the quality of the work as a whole. Nevertheless, it stands as a significant contribution to its field, and Hansen should be praised for so firmly placing the history of mountaineering ?on belay? within scholarly discussions of modernity and the Enlightenment self.

Notes

1. http://digitalcommons.wpi.edu/summits/ [2]> [accessed 14 October 2013].Back to (1)
2. Readers interested in seeing similar use of visual evidence applied to early Everest expeditions could profitably turn to Peter H. Hansen, ?The dancing lamas of Everest: cinema, orientalism, and Anglo-Tibetan relations in the 1920s?, *American Historical Review*, 101 (June 1996), 712?44.Back to (2)
3. C.f. Peter H. Hansen, ?Confetti of Empire: the conquest of Everest in Nepal, India, Britain and New Zealand?, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 42 (April 2000), 307?32.Back to (3)

Other reviews:
Times Literary Supplement
http://www.the-tls.co.uk/tls/public/article1291439.ece [3]
LA Review of Books
https://lareviewofbooks.org/review/peak-adventure-on-mountaineering-and-the-enlightenment [4]
Hindu
http://www.thehindu.com/books/books-reviews/peaks-of-human-success/article4756732.ece [5]
History Today
http://www.historytoday.com/blog/2013/10/mountaineering-after-enlightenment [6]

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[6] http://www.historytoday.com/blog/2013/10/mountaineering-after-enlightenment