

BOOK REVIEW

## Schaumann, Caroline. *Peak Pursuits: The Emergence of Mountaineering in the Nineteenth Century*

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In *Peak Pursuits*, Caroline Schaumann takes readers along on numerous fascinating journeys into the uplands to forge a new history of modern mountaineering. The book, in her own words, “presents a kind of Humboldtian history of mountaineering in the long nineteenth century (circa 1789–1914), when both scientific progress and aesthetic reverence became available through the embodied experience of the mountaineer” (4). Like the expeditions that form the core of this study, it is an admirably ambitious undertaking that traces developments over a two-hundred-year period in diverse environments spanning Europe and the Americas. By bringing new perspectives to foundational texts about mountain experiences from the mid-eighteenth century until World War I, Schaumann offers a new, more ambiguous history of elite mountaineering culture that contains lessons for our current age of human-induced environmental change, the Anthropocene.

Schaumann’s approach is informed by recent theories in material ecocriticism that permit the conceptualization of mountaineering as an intimate, physical exchange between the human and nonhuman world. These ideas build off the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who rejected the Cartesian severing of subject-object and mind-body dichotomies by emphasizing the knowledge emerging from the range of human sensory experience. Mountaineering, for Schaumann, “becomes the creative act of perceiving the world with one’s hands and feet” (6). *Peak Pursuits* analyzes the writings of some of the towering pioneers of mountain exploration in search of evidence of this embodied climbing experience. While Schaumann shows that the motivations driving these people into the uplands changed over time, in all cases we can see that the physical act of coming into contact with snow, rock, and ice influenced their experience.

The book is divided into three parts organized geographically and proceeding (mostly) chronologically. Part 1 follows globetrotting Alexander von Humboldt on his lesser-known climbs of the peaks of Pico de Teide in the Canary Islands—the explorer’s first ascent—the Silla de Caracas in Venezuela, and several volcanoes of the Andean Cordillera. Though Humboldt has been the focus of a slew of recent scholarship, the analysis here produces some important new insights. Contrary to prevailing conceptions, Schaumann finds that, at least in the mountains, Humboldt was not a colonizer. More importantly, Schaumann proposes that Humboldt should also be understood as a mountaineer, indeed as the originator of many tropes of modern mountain writing. Thereafter, the setting shifts to the Alps, where Schaumann presents a chapter contextualizing the history of the chain and five chapters on key personalities in the emerging “Alpinism.” These include Horace-Bénédict de Saussure, James David Forbes, Louis Agassiz, Albert Smith, Alfred Wills, John Tyndall, Edward Whymper, and finally Leslie Stephen. In Europe’s iconic mountain chain, we witness the transition from climbing for scientific and aesthetic purposes to new goals of sport, exercise, and recreation—with a nationally tinged fixation on first ascents and conquering summits that have continued to the present. In the final part, the book returns to the Americas, following the routes of Clarence King and John Muir in the United States West.

As Schaumann acknowledges, most of these personalities have received wide scholarly attention. *Peak Pursuits*, however, places them in conversation with one another. It also provides an explanation

for how mountaineering shifted over this time period, one that points out the social and technological changes of the nineteenth century that both permitted more people to get to the Alps and scale their peaks and created an audience hungry to read about mountain exploits that seemed the antidote to urban industrial modernity.

*Peak Pursuits* is most successful in demonstrating the profound ambivalence that accompanied all these mountaineers throughout the period under study. Whatever motivations moved these men to ascend to great heights and document their experience, their actual physical encounter prompted a range of reactions and emotions that shaped their understanding of the event. While most authors have treated artistic, scientific, and touristic forays into the peaks as separate research areas, Schaumann convincingly shows that the boundaries separating these categories were rarely so stark in reality. While it is always tricky to demonstrate the genealogy of ideas, the book provides plausible connective material, particularly in the introduction. The focus on the gendered aspects of climbing, and particularly the masculine relationships fashioned at altitude, is illuminating. Though the volume lacks maps, its rich illustrations—primarily images that appeared in the landmark mountaineering publications that form a good portion of the source material—alone are of immense scholarly value.

Readers of the *Austrian History Yearbook* should know that although *Peak Pursuits* presents itself in many ways as a history of the Alps and Alpinism, Austria itself does not really figure into the account. The focus is clearly on the French and above all the Swiss Alps, with Italy and Italians also appearing on the periphery. While there is no denying the importance of Mont Blanc and the Matterhorn, it is equally true that the Eastern Alps—Bavaria, Austria, and Slovenia—played a role in these developments. In general, the absence of discussions of some key terminology and selections—mountaineering, alpinism, the periodization of the “long nineteenth century”—blunts what could have been additional analytical impacts of the book.

Due to its transnational and multidisciplinary framework, *Peak Pursuits* defies easy categorization. These same characteristics, however, mean the book should find interest in a wide range of fields. In addition to providing concise and vital histories of canonical modern mountaineering episodes, *Peak Pursuits* holds important insights for literary scholars, environmental historians and environmentalists, and historians of science alike.