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Author: Ives, Jack D.

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The Call of Everest: The History, Science, and Future of the World's Tallest Peak

Edited by Conrad Anker.
Washington, DC: National Geographic Society, 2013. 304 pp. US$ 35.00.
ISBN 978-1-4262-1016-7.

The National Geographic Society (NGS) has chosen to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the United States/NGS team's ascent of Mount Everest in 1963 in combination with the 60th anniversary of the first documented ascent and successful descent. This was the 1953 culmination of the triumph of Hillary and Tenzing under the leadership of Brigadier John Hunt's British expedition. The historical depth of the book extends back to the 19th-century discovery of the mountain and the assumption that it was the world's highest, incidental to the monumental British Great Trigonometrical Survey of India. The book covers the earliest reconnaissance and the several attempts on the summit from the northern, Tibetan, side prior to World War II. It is beautifully executed with exquisite photographs that we all, long since, have come to recognize as the hallmark of the NGS.

The presentation is broken down into 8 chapters. Preceded by Tom Hornbein's Foreword, each chapter is written by a specialist in the relevant field: the meaning of Everest, geotectonics, anthropology, natural history, climbing history, medical research, an account of 1 season on the mountain, and the future. There are recommendations for further reading, mini-biographies of the contributors, illustration credits, and an index. Apart from accounts of the early British attempts from the north side, the book emphasizes the southern approach as well as the entire Khumbu region of the Nepal Himal. The scientific accounts are attuned for a general readership.

Several revered Everest photographic archives have made contributions, especially that of the Royal Geographical Society. This has ensured a widely embracing photo record of Everest's mountaineering history. Understandably there was no attempt to be complete. The 3-dimensional diagram giving a Khumbu Glacier–South Col perspective, used as a frontispiece, is highly effective. Similarly, the oblique high-altitude photograph (pp 144–145) gives a dramatic display of 15 of the major routes to the summit, linked to their respective expeditions. Surprisingly, the impressive second successful attempt of 1956 that included the first ascent of Lhotse (8501 m) by the Swiss is neglected.

In Chapter 1, Conrad Anker explores the "call" of Everest from its first sighting, through the early mountaineering attempts, to realization of the "American Dream" in 1963. He proceeds from 1963 to introduce the subsequent changes in the meaning of Everest. These have been influenced by improvements in equipment, techniques, and the onrush of mass trekking tourism, to the serious overcrowding of the last 20 years. Regardless, his beliefs are couched by his final chapter subheading: "Forever Everest."

In Chapter 2, David R. Lageson provides a substantive account of the birth of Everest from the Ordovician life forms on the seafloor of the Tethys Ocean, via plate tectonics, to the fossiliferous sediments (The Yellow Band) close to the summit of today. En route he introduces Sir George Everest and the British Survey of India, as well as 2 geological pioneers who went before him: Noel Odell and Augusto Gansser.

Brot Coburn uses Chapter 3 to illustrate the special people of the Khumbu, the Sherpas. He gives an overview of their original culture, religion, sacred places, and way of life. The impact of the closing of Tibet by China in 1949 is emphasized as marking the beginning of the vast changes that have overtaken both their way of life and the landscape itself. This leads to an introduction to the rapid growth in mountaineering and trekking. One devastating statistic is that the Khumbu experiences annual influxes in excess of 25,000 trekkers compared to a resident population of about 3500. The significance of this enormous challenge, positive and negative, is outlined: from the highly beneficial creation of hospitals and schools, initiated by Sir Edmund Hillary, to the disproportionate number of deaths of Sherpa climbing guides, alcoholism, drugs, and garbage, not to mention a significant Sherpa diaspora. Coincidentally, Coburn has published a separate book on the 1963 ascent of Everest giving highly relevant and detailed personal information on the primary members of the expedition (Coburn 2013).

Alton C. Byers, as the only geographer among the contributors, appropriately, has produced Chapter 4, "The Nature of Everest." This constitutes a realistic account of the natural landscape based in large part on his extensive field research. He provides a balanced account of recent human impacts correcting former unsupportable assumptions that were presented as authoritarian conclusions. While this has been published previously in the scientific literature following his early fieldwork in the 1980s, its reiteration here is necessary in the context of a possible uninformed general readership: massive deforestation was not occurring in the 1970s and 1980s, and there is strong evidence for human entry into the Khumbu centuries prior to the conventionally accorded 16th/17th-century immigration of Sherpas from eastern Tibet. He also introduces the current concerns about climate change that is leading to glacier retreat and thinning and the growth of potentially dangerous glacier lakes. The conspicuous change in the glaciers is convincingly demonstrated by his replication of photographs dating from the 1950s.

Bernadette McDonald introduces the reader to many of the

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mountaineering pioneers. Her chapter includes several iconic photographs. The chapter contains an intriguing vignette of George Mallory (p 153: box by Audrey Salkeld) that includes a snapshot of a seemingly lethargic Cambridge undergraduate prior to World War I. Another box, written by Tom Hornbein (p 188), provides insights into his West Ridge traverse with Willi Unsoeld and the helicopter evacuation of the frozen-footed Willi and Barry Bishop. The chapter goes on to introduce the new technology, new routes, ascents without oxygen, and, finally, the present-day madness and risks associated with irresponsible overcrowding.

Under the apt title "The Agonies of Everest," Bruce Johnson provides a gripping chapter on high-altitude medical research. He provides a detailed, nontechnical, description of the human body's physical challenges to surviving at extreme altitude. This is accompanied by a revealing graph that plots the number of deaths against the total number of climbers between 1975 and 2012. While the total annual number of climbers increased from 17 in 1975 to 575 in 2012, the number of deaths has remained relatively constant—generally below 10, or a total of 6219 successful ascents against 233 fatalities. Nevertheless, it is assumed that the importance of high-altitude medicine far outweighs the death score per se. Critical medical insights are provided for the treatment of sea-level ailments, for instance, of heart failure. In 2010, some six million patients in the United States experienced heart failure at a cost of nearly US$ 40 million.

Mark Jenkins (Chapter 7) emphasizes the "trophy" climbing of today: more than 95% of the climbers are paying clients. Against this, heroism, inspiration, and spiritual uplift are emphasized, epitomized, for instance, by President Kennedy's presenting Norman Dyhrenfurth with the Society's Hubbard Medal, the 2012 Legacy Climb team, and the great scientific advances. Nevertheless, this does not obliterate the ghastly photograph on page 264 showing the long line of climbers plodding through the Yellow Band, all facing the acute danger of simple congestion of too many would-be summiteers. Jenkins also raises some criticisms of National Park and World Heritage management, a topic he addresses in greater detail elsewhere (Jenkins 2013).

David Breashears (Chapter 8) completes the text with his thoughts on "The Future of Everest." His subheadings speak for themselves: "The Age of Innocence," "Lonely Heroes," and "End of Innocence." He concludes on an optimistic note, "Enduring Rewards," and, to return to the beginning, "The Call of Everest."

The book, as a whole, is a historic treasure house of mountaineering history, philosophy, tales of adventure, and precious landscape and people photographs. There are only 3 minor quibbles: the dust jacket has a determination to curl up; the binding is so tight that the book will not smoothly lay open on one's lap for easy reading; and the layout of chapter headings and interior quotations are set in violently conflicting colors with variably sized block capitals that render them almost illegible.

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AUTHOR

Jack D. Ives
jack.ives@carleton.ca
Department of Geography and Environmental Studies, Carleton University
Ottawa K1S 5B6, Canada

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