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Himalaya: A Human History. By Ed Douglas

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Himalaya: A Human History is a kaleidoscopic book: voluminous, eclectic, and sometimes sprawling. Across 20 chapters, supplemented by 65 well-chosen illustrations, Ed Douglas takes an encompassing approach to this much-studied region. Topics include the emergence of the mountains from the Tethys sea, the role of the Himalaya in the *Puranas*, the exploits of explorers dispatched by the British Empire, the 1962 border dispute between India and China, and the recent tensions around Sherpa labor and mountaineering on Everest (to name but a few). The temporal scope thus ranges from deep history to modern geopolitics, with perhaps the most attention given to the 18th to 20th centuries. Such an all-encompassing approach is valuable in illustrating the depth and variety of available Himalayan histories, even as it comes at the cost of structure and focus. Indeed, some readers may suffer slight whiplash as Douglas moves across place, time, and incident with enthusiastic abandon, but for many this eclecticism will be a reward in and of itself.

Douglas is the author of several previous nonfiction works about the Himalaya, especially concerned with mountaineering, and was formerly the editor of the *Alpine Journal*. He clearly has a deep familiarity with and affection for mountains in general and the Himalaya in particular, and this comes through in the writing (which includes thoughtful personal anecdotes). In this book, his stated aim is to unpack enduring myths about the Himalaya: "It is not that the Himalaya is an intellectual blank on the map: there's a wealth of scholarship on every aspect of life there. It's more that myths and legends about the Himalaya continue to dominate popular culture" (p 529). As he goes on to explain, "In a small way, this book is an attempt to bridge that gap" and it is "for better or worse, an attempt to write something of popular appeal to those with an interest who want to know more" (p 529).

Douglas, not an academic historian by training, presents us with an almost entirely narrative history, pitched for a wide, nonspecialist audience. This approach leads to occasional loose and anachronistic analogies—"like a modern global bank, the East India Company had become too big to fail" (p 127)—but the prose is never less than lively. As is freely acknowledged in a short postscript on sources, this is also a completely tertiary work, though Douglas is correct in assuming that "most scholars specialising in the region will recognise where most of what's written here comes from" (p 529). For this reason, Douglas also eschews the encumbrance of footnotes, though he does include a substantial and up-to-date bibliography of relevant scholarship (some of it very recent).

A key strength of the book is its consistent attention to the romantic and oriental fascinations with the Himalaya that continue to plague much popular scholarship on the region. These include, for example, notions of Tibet as "isolated," "spiritual," and "pure," and Douglas's earnest efforts to deconstruct these tropes are welcome. Similarly, he showcases the absurdities inherent in many of these ideas: "As the Tibetan historian Lobsang Yongdan [2011] writes: 'It is ironic that Western writers created a mysterious land called Shangri-La in Tibet while Tibetan scholars were looking for Shambhala somewhere in Europe'" (p 302). Also important is quashing any lingering illusions that the Himalaya were ever "unknown": "Far from being a blank on the map, southern Tibet was part of a Himalayan network of cultures linking two of the most populous regions on earth, India and China" (p 201). In this way, *Himalaya: A Human History* frequently brings to mind Peter Bishop's (1989) magisterial *The Myth of Shangri-La*, and presents a similarly valuable historicization of lowlanders' persistent and sometimes insidious imaginings of the Himalaya.

As he does throughout, Douglas is absolutely right to emphasize the heterogeneity of the Himalaya, not only in terms of demography, linguistics, and history, but also physically and climatically. In this way, he echoes recent calls such as those in Chetan Singh's (2011) *Recognizing Diversity*. At the same time, as Douglas argues, in "many Western books published on Himalayan geography, historians tended to break the region down into polities," but "that approach ignored the Himalayan region's sense of itself: its shared culture and experience" (p 11). Indeed, he is admirably attuned to the benefits and challenges of addressing the region holistically, even if in practice—as is so often the case in scholarship on the Himalaya—he ultimately gives a disproportionate amount of space to Tibet and Nepal. The result is also that the geography, climate, and environment of the mountains play a large and occasionally outsized role in this "human history." While mostly well handled, this does sometimes verge on determinism: "Almost nowhere else is that relationship between geography and culture so starkly obvious than in the world's highest mountains" (p 18).

Written in an accessible and engaging manner, albeit without much by way of guide rails, this book will be of interest to anyone wanting a general overview of Himalayan history (readers of this journal interested in sustainable development topics will need to look elsewhere). There is absolutely the scope and need for this sort of popular history, and it is perhaps most valuable for taking on the "tension, between myth and reality, [that] still tears at the Himalaya today" (p 9). Even if he never entirely transcends the romantic tropes he describes, Douglas nevertheless does important work historicizing them, and gently pointing out their irrelevance to a region with more than enough interest beyond oriental stereotypes: "Although empires and distant populations had often treated its peoples with indifference or hostility, the Himalaya is a real place with its own history

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and cultures" (p 525). If the book ultimately proves the impossibility of capturing all of the diversity and richness of Himalayan histories in a single volume, it is nevertheless ambitious to a fault. *Himalaya: A Human History* ought to be read and enjoyed, even as it serves as an important reminder that the work needed to disentangle the Himalaya from myth is far from complete.

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