

***Mountains, History, and Nature:  
A View Back from the Anthropocene Towards Historical  
Mountaineering Literature***

Harri Salovaara  
University of Vaasa, Finland  
harri.salovaara@uwasa.fi

Caroline Schaumann. *Peak Pursuits: The Emergence of Mountaineering in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020), 365 pp.

Sean Ireton and Caroline Schaumann, editors. *Mountains and the German Mind: Translations from Gessner to Messner* (Rochester: Camden House, 2020), 361 pp.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecoazona.2022.13.1.4519>



Mountains, mountaineering, and mountaineers have so far not been researched extensively in ecocritical scholarship, so the publication of two recent (2020) ecocritically oriented books, Caroline Schaumann's monograph *Peak Pursuits: The Emergence of Mountaineering in the Nineteenth Century* and the anthology *Mountains and the German Mind: Translations from Gessner to Messner* edited by Sean Ireton and Caroline Schaumann is a valuable addition to the hopefully growing body of research on mountains and nature, especially from a historical perspective, and compliments Ireton and Schaumann's earlier edited volume on the topic, the 2012 *Heights of Reflection*. Although the titles do not explicitly call forth immediate associations with ecocriticism, the two recent books, Schaumann's monograph especially, repeatedly discuss not only environmental issues in general but contemporary ecocritical questions such as new materialisms, gender, race, and class in relation to outdoor pursuits, and the significance of the term Anthropocene to current understandings of the climate crisis. Indeed, Schaumann convincingly argues that in the Anthropocene, "the pursuit of science or mountaineering without an ecocritical awareness seems ignorant and inadequate" (148). Importantly, Schaumann considers it important in the face of catastrophic climate change to also remember and celebrate things that bring humans joy, arguing that "we need reminders of mountain pleasures, wonder and passion more than ever" (23) both to act and live ecologically but also to enjoy doing so.

Addressed at Anglophone audiences, both books discuss mountaineering history and nature from a Western viewpoint. Schaumann's *Peak Pursuits* focuses on European and Anglo-American experiences in the mountains, and Ireton and Schaumann's edited anthology *Mountains and the German Mind* makes thirteen different German texts

available for the first time for English readers. Aside from the other merits of the work carried out by Ireton and Schaumann, this is also a valuable cultural act and also allows the translators of the texts, the oldest of which stem from the sixteenth century, to extensively comment on them and motivate to the readers their continued and contemporary importance.

While it is impossible to outline any joint main argument in two books of somewhat different premises, there are broad similarities in what is foregrounded in the books. For example, after a thorough, historically informed discussion on Western mountaineering practices in *Peak Pursuits*, Schaumann ends by forcefully arguing for the importance of “celebrating the human creativity” that enables “entanglement” with mountains as a way to combat “carbon emissions rising from industry, transportation, and deforestation” (298). Similarly, in *Mountains and the German Mind* Ireton and Schaumann stress the importance of reflecting on the “double bind” of mountain enjoyment and consumption and consequently, how mountaineering “can continue to exist as we move forward in the age of the Anthropocene” (16).

Before discussing the two books individually, it may be interesting to note some further common threads, beyond environmental issues, between them. To start, both books frequently discuss issues of race, class, and gender in relation to how mountaineering literature portrays mountaineers’ efforts and enjoyment in the mountains, and which privileges enable them to do so. For example, the topic of race is foregrounded in both books: In *Peak Pursuits* Schaumann frequently discusses colonialist and racist discourses surrounding European mountaineering adventure and discovery and the frequent backgrounding and subjugation of Indigenous Peoples, and in *Mountains and the German Mind* questions of race, racism, and Germany’s Nazi history are explicit especially when the book discusses the writing of the likes of Eduard Pichl and Leni Riefenstahl. Further, class and other issues related to the often implicit elitism of mountaineering are frequently brought up in both books, especially when discussing those often nameless individuals of the working classes who enabled the wealthy and aristocratic to pursue their ambitions in the mountains but also when describing the rise of the working and middle class mountaineer in the nineteenth century.

As for the importance of gender, and often especially masculinity, both books frequently discuss the implications of the protagonists’ gender on their actions, and Schaumann in *Peak Pursuits* also discusses mountaineering as a gendered practice. It may not have been the intention of the authors and editors, but it is in fact even possible to read the two books as a sort of “rogues’ gallery,” or a “medical record,” of toxic masculinity (Kupers) throughout the ages: Many, if not most, of the men in the books embody an array of vices, from outright racism and misogyny through to extreme egotism, quarrelling, and generally acting irresponsibly, for example towards their partners and family. Concerning this, there are at least two, potentially competing readings that immediately seem to suggest themselves for further analysis: On the one hand, many of the men in the books display symptoms of toxic masculinity, but just as often they are also individuals who are original, adventurous, courageous, generous, and who have contributed to both science and culture. Possibly problematically, but perhaps also fruitfully, both readings can be

correct in some contexts. Regarding the role of women in the books, it is close to nonexistent in *Peak Pursuits*, apart from as foils for the men's actions, and of the thirteen authors translated and analyzed in *Mountains and the German Mind*, only two are women. This is to a degree understandable for books with historical perspectives but also unfortunate, as women's mountaineering history has traditionally been undermined and underresearched (Ives). The two women in *Mountains and the German Mind* do, however, offer interesting glimpses into female perspectives into mountaineering history.

To conclude, aside from race, class, gender, and the environment, both books discuss Western mountaineering history, referring to terminology by John Ruskin and Marjorie Hope Nicholson, as a chronological evolution through "mountain gloom" to "mountain glory" (Ireton and Schaumann 2), from the Sublime through science to sport, and eventually, especially in *Mountains and the German Mind*, from art to philosophy. So, the overall scope of the two books is vast but can usefully be thought of in terms of these recurring themes, which will next be discussed further, starting with *Peak Pursuits*.

Caroline Schaumann's *Peak Pursuits* commences with an introduction where Schaumann frames the book's scope and makes an important contribution by placing mountain studies as part of the current discussions around ecocriticism, such as new materialisms and the relations between gender, class, and the environment. Schaumann shows how new, ecocritically aware readings of old mountaineering texts can challenge established "theoretical constructs" and interpretations of framing mountains as "sublime" and instead excavate for example early mountaineers' "material encounters with wind, cold, and thunder" and indeed their "intimate encounter[s] with rock and ice" that our current "post-sublime environment" may use to better understand "our inherent physical dependency on this earth" (3, 5). Importantly, in contrast to (mostly male) mountaineers' intimate connections with nature, Schaumann also establishes that the hegemonic masculinities (Connell) that they embody also enable "men's dominant position" and contribute to the "drive to conquer nature" (22).

Following the introduction, the book is divided into three parts. Part I, "From Europe to the Americas: Alexander von Humboldt," takes the reader on a journey around the world, following naturalist and explorer Alexander von Humboldt's (1769–1859) scientifically motivated mountain excursions, especially in the Andes of South America. Here Schaumann also discusses Humboldt's "escape" from "heterosexual gender roles" (30) and subsequent "queer studies" (52) discussions around his sexuality. The first part also succeeds in uncovering motivations other than purely scientific research behind Humboldt's mountaineering, and Schaumann argues that Humboldt's "quest ... teaches us that mountaineering, rather than being an isolated leisure activity, is always embedded in a cultural and historical context" (72). Unfortunately, although Schaumann recognizes that "[i]nhabitants of the Andean regions had long climbed and dwelled in its mountains", Part I in small part fails to challenge Eurocentric conquest narratives by perpetuating the myth, eagerly publicized by Humboldt himself, that he set altitude records on his attempts to climb high mountains in the Andes. However, biomedical (see e.g. Ceruti) and cultural-archeological (see e.g. Bernbaum) research has definitively established that peaks up to 6700 meters high "across five continents, were ascended in prehistoric times" (Echevarría

190) and Humboldt thus did not climb “higher than any human on this earth has climbed before” (Humboldt qtd. in Schaumann 48) when he climbed to around 5400 meters on the mountain Antisana in 1802. Luckily, much interesting research on indigenous peoples’ mountain activities is becoming increasingly accessible, and voices other than white men’s can hopefully be included in future mountain narratives and research.

In Part II, “Alpine Adventures,” the book’s focus shifts to the European Alps and the transformation of mountaineering from scientific research into tourism and sport. The men under discussion in this section, in their respective chapters, are scientist Horace-Bénédict de Saussure (1740–1799), physicist James David Forbes (1809–1868) and racist biologist Louis Agassiz (1807–1873), author Albert Smith (1816–1860) and judge Alfred Wills (1828–1912, physicist John Tyndall (1820–1893) and explorer Edward Whymper (1740–1799, and author (and father of Virginia Woolf) Leslie Stephen (1832–1904). Similarly to, for example, Robert Macfarlane’s *Mountains of the Mind*, Part II discusses the birth of mountaineering largely from a British perspective and describes the Alps as a place first for scientific discovery and later, upper class sport that carries high masculine distinction, and finally, a place where even working class men can enact their “competitive masculinities” (175). Schaumann defines as the focus of the chapter on Forbes and Agassiz “(1) the tension between scientific enterprise and the thrill of climbing, (2) the overwhelming emotional and physical experience [of climbing] that defies spoken or written expression, and (3) the intimacy between males and the desire to escape societal conventions” (120) but these themes reoccur throughout Part II and indeed the entire book, and provide interesting avenues for further research. Also, the chapter on Leslie Stephen is especially pertinent for scholars interested in new materialisms and mountains, as Schaumann convincingly analyzes Stephens’s mountaineering in terms proposed by Karen Barad as “intra-action” (225) between human and mountain.

Part III, “Exploring the American West,” then discusses how European mountain practices were imported by white settlers to North America after its conquest. Here, Schaumann discusses how privileged men of European ancestry pursue their personal feelings of awe, intimacy, conquest, and connection in the mountains from where the indigenous peoples have been largely displaced, and how “North American identity [is] predicated” (224) on this erasure. Part III does this discussion through focusing on two men, geologist Clarence King (1842–1901) and environmental philosopher and author John Muir (1838–1914). Part III continues discussing questions of gender, race and class and does so by for example both discussing King’s abolitionism and “conceited gender identity” (245) and revered environmentalist Muir’s myopia towards the suffering of the “Yosemite Miwok, during a time of their extermination” (263). Part III also briefly touches upon the practice of white settlers (re)naming peaks and thus contributing to the erasure of the indigenous peoples’ history. As a direction for future research, more explicitly focusing on this could be useful to highlight how important an act naming can be, and how ecocriticism could contribute to discussions around indigenous peoples, places, names, and their connection to current outdoor leisure practices in appropriated lands.

Schaumann concludes the book by providing an “Epilogue” where she discusses her personal history as climber, mountaineer, and scholar. This last section is at times

poignant when it discusses how “we [climbers and outdoor enthusiasts in general] are destroying the very thing we love” (190), and provides a valuable and courageous personal viewpoint into the intersection between climbing, scholarship, and the current climate catastrophe. Throughout *Peak Pursuits*, Schaumann’s prose is lucid and enjoyable, and the book is likely to reach general audiences well beyond specialized ecocritics or mountaineering historians. Overall, the main arguments of the book are convincing; mountains have provided humans with scientific knowledge, joy of discovery, and pleasure. Now is the time to start “securing their protection, acknowledging their resistance, and celebrating the human creativity that comes with such entanglement” (198).

In *Mountains and the German Mind*, Schaumann “ropes up” with Sean Ireton as editors of an anthology that ambitiously promises to bring together mountains and the German mind. “German” is here understood to refer to the larger German-speaking *Mitteleuropa*, not exclusively the contemporary German state. The book is largely successful in its aim, at least concerning the minds of those German-speakers with the will and means to write about their mountain experiences, and bringing together such varied German-language texts from the Early Modern era to the (late/post) Modern era to English readers, is worthwhile in itself. In addition to its Introduction, the book includes thirteen chapters that cover a swath of time between 1541 (Gessner) and 2009 (Messner). The original German texts and excerpts have been mostly translated by subject matter experts who also provide extensive commentary essays to accompany the original texts.

In the introduction, Ireton and Schaumann establish two important positions. First, they discuss the “intellectual-historical level” of the “periodization of human-mountain engagement” and dismantle the common misconception that early European mountain encounters were purely characterized by “dread” whereas contemporary encounters would be purely characterized by “worship” (2). Instead, they and the chapters in the book offer more nuanced readings and, like Schaumann in her monograph, propose alternatives to the concept of the mountain sublime. Second, Ireton and Schaumann establish that “the problem with the sublime paradigm of awe and fear is that it exalts an experience that can only be savored by a privileged few” (6). Further, they discuss how hierarchical thought models that see mountains and nature as always far off from human residence and activity can ultimately be detrimental, by accepting degradation of the so-called ‘ordinary’” (6).

The thirteen chapters in *Mountains and the German Mind* introduce the following authors and texts (translator-experts mostly in parentheses): First, a 1541 text from Conrad Gessner (Dan Hooley) on the admiration of mountains, including a deeply elitist yet highly descriptive and amusingly broad-sweeping characterization of non-mountaineers as being “of sluggish disposition to whom marvel is dead” (6). The book has a further three texts from the 18<sup>th</sup> century: First, is Johann Jakob Scheuzer’s (Jennifer Jenkins and Christoph Weber) 1716 text on the history of Swiss mountains and how mountains can benefit both human and nonhuman life. Second, Sophie von La Roche’s (Martina Kopf) 1787 diary of traveling in the Swiss Alps shows her “as a dual pioneer in both women’s mountaineering and women’s mountaineering literature” (77). La Roche’s experiences

were especially interesting as she both took part in “the women’s emancipation movement” and had “encounters with people from different classes” (78, 79) when ascending Swiss mountains. Third, famed philosopher G.W.F. Hegel’s (Sean Franzel) 1796 diary, again depicting travels in the Swiss Alps, shows Hegel’s reluctance to “embrace proto-Romantic accounts of the mountain sublime” (99). Instead, the somewhat dour Hegel claims mountain glaciers to be “neither majestic nor lovely” (107) but instead embarks on an interesting analysis of the relationship between the act of seeing and the image itself.

The book contains two chapters from the nineteenth century: First, Schaumann discusses further the attempts by Alexander von Humboldt to ascend South American mountains and his 1802 travel diary description of the attempts, and Ireton introduces excerpts from Hermann von Barth’s 1874 accounts of his extensive, militaristically described climbing endeavors. Ireton characterizes von Barth as a “bioregional climber” (147) because of his attachment to climbing almost exclusively in his native Northern Limestone Alps and further describes him as a *Gipfelsstürmer*, that is, “someone who climbed for climbing’s sake” (149). Whereas von Humboldt as discussed by Schaumann originally portrayed his mountain exploits as purely scientific endeavors yet seemed to increasingly start reflecting on the joys of mountaineering, von Barth represents a decidedly more contemporary figure who no longer feels the need to couch his desire to simply climb, in scientific goals.

The bulk of the book’s chapters are formed by texts from the twentieth century, and as such they provide an interesting chronological continuation to Schaumann’s monograph and represent texts from a significant era of German history. First, Georg Simmel (Jens Klenner) discusses alpine aesthetics and social class in his 1911 text. Several of the following chapters then discuss mountains and the German mind with the significant backdrop of the looming Second World War, the Holocaust, and the thinking that brought Germany to them. Eduard Pichl’s (Wilfried Wilms) 1914 and 1923 texts discuss the notion of “German Purity” (210) and the Nazis’ (including Pichl) attempts to exclude Jews from German alpine clubs, and Wilms’s introduction to the texts critically discusses the history of these attempts.

The inclusion of excerpts from Leni Riefenstahl’s (Seth Peabody) 1933 memoir *Struggle in Snow and Ice (Kampf in Schnee und Eis)* marks the first of three essays on *Bergfilme*, that is, mountain films, and specifically how they may have contributed to Nazi ideas about race, heroism, and masculinity. Riefenstahl always downplayed her association with Nazism, and Peabody shows in his introductory essay how complicated the links between “Alpinism and fascism” (219) were in pre-war Germany. As Riefenstahl is the only other woman in the two books, it may also be interesting to note how differently she relates (and twentieth century society allows her) to the mountains compared to her 18<sup>th</sup> century predecessor Sophie von La Roche: Riefenstahl is not carried up mountains by working class men but in enthusiastic prose describes her often impressive and genuinely dangerous adventures in the mountains. She also takes on an active role as director of *Bergfilme*. A further interesting addition to *Bergfilme* authors is Arnold Fanck (Kamaal Haque) whose work played an important part in the popularization

of skiing and also of disinguing mountains as places for academically trained, upper middle-class” people (252). The chapter on director Hans Ertl (Harald Höbusch) provides an additional perspective on *Bergfilme* in the 1930s.

The final two chapters of the book discuss more contemporary viewpoints on mountains. The chapter on Max Pentner (Paul Bucholz) may be of interest to ecocritics involved with new materialisms as it discusses the “entanglement” (310) between humans and mountains. The concluding chapter on famous mountaineer Reinhold Messner (Gundolf Graml) is an excellent conclusion to the book and provides provocative viewpoints on elitism, class, material encounters, risk, the effect of climate change on mountain routes, and other environmental issues.

In conclusion, both books succeed in providing the reader valuable new insight into the natural and cultural history of mountains. For ecocritics especially, they also offer contemporary scholarly viewpoints into how the climate crisis affects mountains and mountain cultures in the Anthropocene. Further, Schaumann especially discusses how material human-mountain entanglements can be approached by ecocritical research. Otherwise, there is in general very little that could be said to be missing from either book; although for example women’s role is minimal, this is largely understandable seeing the historical context here, and both books are in this respect congruent with other books and articles in the field, so this is less a shortcoming and more an opportunity for interested scholars to proceed along other, less traveled routes. Other potential avenues of research that may be inspired by these books perhaps include the role of mountains in cultures beyond Germany and Europe, Indigenous Peoples’ and nonwhite mountaineers’ narratives, and even more explicitly ecocritical studies on mountains and nature.

## Works Cited

- Bernbaum, Edwin. *Sacred Mountains of the World*. University of California Press, 1998.
- Ceruti, Maria Constanza. “Frozen Mummies from Andean Mountaintop Shrines: Bioarchaeology and Ethnohistory of Inca Human Sacrifice.” *BioMed Research International*, vol. 2015, pp. 1–12.
- Connell, R.W. *Masculinities*. Polity, 2005.
- Echevarría, Evelio. “Summit Archaeology: Prehistoric Ascents in the World’s Highest Mountains.” *The Alpine Journal*, vol. 2014, pp. 190–198.
- Ireton, Sean and Caroline Schaumann, editors. *Mountains and the German Mind: Translations from Gessner to Messner*. Camden House, 2020.
- Ives, Katie. “The Sharp End: The Ice World Beyond.” *Alpinist*, vol. 53, 2016, pp. 11–12.
- Kupers, T. A. “Toxic Masculinity as a Barrier to Mental Health Treatment in Prison.” *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, vol. 2005, pp. 713–724.
- Macfarlane, Robert. *Mountains of the mind*. Granta, 2008.
- Schaumann, Caroline. *Peak Pursuits: The Emergence of Mountaineering in the Nineteenth Century*. Yale University Press, 2020.