

The Boardman Tasker Prize 2011

Adjudication by Barry Imeson

I would like to start by thanking my two distinguished co-judges, Lindsay Griffin and Bernard Newman, for ensuring that we have all arrived at this year's award in good health and still on speaking terms.

We met at the BMC on 9 September to agree a shortlist based on what, in our view, constituted 'mountain literature' and what also met the Award criterion of being an original work that made an outstanding contribution to mountain literature.

We then considered the twenty three books that had been entered and, with no small difficulty, produced a shortlist of five.

We would like to start with the non-shortlisted books. As judges we were conscious of the effort required to write a book and we want to thank all the authors who provided such a variety of enjoyable, and often thought-provoking, reads. We were, however, particularly impressed by two books, which though not shortlisted, we believe have made welcome additions to the history of mountaineering.

The first of these was *Prelude to Everest* by Ian Mitchell & George Rodway. Their book sheds new light on the correspondence between Hinks and Collie and includes Kellas's neglected 1920 paper *A Consideration of the Possibility of Ascending Mount Everest*. This is a long overdue and serious attempt to re-habilitate Kellas, a modest and self-effacing man. Kellas was an important mountaineer, whose ascent of Pauhunri in North East Sikkim was, at that time, the highest summit in the world trodden by man. His research into the effects of altitude on climbers was ahead of its time. We commend this book to you.

The second was Graham Ratcliffe's *A Day to Die for*. During his quest to become the first British mountaineer to climb Everest from both Tibet and from Nepal he was on the South Col in 1996 when he became a bystander to that year's tragic events. Though the book covers his other mountaineering adventures, its main thrust is his determination to establish that the deaths on Everest were not caused, as was generally accepted, by a freak storm, but by one which had been predicted and whose imminent arrival had been made known to the expedition leaders. Though this is a book that will undoubtedly cause controversy in some quarters, we believe that Everest historians, as well as those who were on the mountain in 1996, will find it an absorbing read.

Of the other non- shortlisted books, mention should be made of Adrian Hendroff's *From High Places*, a beautifully illustrated and comprehensive celebration of Ireland's mountains, based on the author's journeys and enhanced with stories from Ireland's history and folklore. *Over the Hill* by Graham Wilson is a delightfully written and enjoyable exposition of the author's often forceful views on mountain-related matters that cover a large amount of

ground. We feel sure that the final chapter's list of his favourite books will bring approving nods from many older climbers.

We can also recommend *Troll Wall*, Tony Howard's gripping and previously untold story of the Rimmon Mountaineering Club's 1965 ascent of Europe's tallest vertical rock face. For Tony Howard the Troll Wall was to be the beginning of a life of adventure that, though touched upon in the last chapter, would merit a book of its own.

Before moving on to the five shortlisted books we would like to draw attention to two more books. Firstly, Richard Sale's *The Challenge of K2*. This is a well researched overview of climbing on the mountain up to 2010 with accompanying notes that make for interesting reading. And finally, Peter Berg's *Scrambles with a Camera*, based on Edward Whymper's 1895 slide lecture is a book that at last makes available to historians of the Matterhorn, Whymper's excellent slides.

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I would now like to move on to the five shortlisted books but before doing so, I am reminded of Edward Whymper's words:

'Why is it that men who cannot speak, allow themselves to be put forward to bore their fellow creatures? And why do not men who can speak say something that is worth listening to?'

It is then with some trepidation, that I move on to the shortlist, starting with *Shadow on the Matterhorn*. Ian Smith's book is the first serious biography of Edward Whymper since Frank Smythe's in 1940. It is well researched and has much to recommend it, as well as the light it throws on Whymper's travels in Equador, Canada and Greenland.

Ian Smith takes care not to labour what most of us already know of Whymper's adventures in the Alps, including his extraordinary crossing of the Col Dolent and his obsession with the Matterhorn. Aware, however, that the reader's view of the Matterhorn story could be influenced by *Scrambles* – written some three and four years later – he reveals details of Whymper's life that allow the reader to have a broader, and perhaps more sympathetic appreciation of the man. The book also touches on the criticisms Whymper endured from the Times, the public and Charles Dickens, following the tragedy on the Matterhorn.

Shadow on the Matterhorn covers Whymper's early days in the family firm, his devotion to Surrey CCC, his life-long enjoyment of swimming and boating and his flowering into a formidable businessman as well as an industrious and accomplished wood engraver, the history and practice of which is well researched by the author.

Students of Whymper might look for more information about the many publications that featured Edward Whymper's engravings and his short and ill-fated marriage to Edith Lewin. In this, as in many other aspects of his life, Ian Smith does not disappoint.

Whymper's time in Ecuador, which was to establish his reputation as an explorer despite the appalling weather and his less than enthusiastic, and soap averse, guides, is well covered. The book also unearths some elements of the man's life that may have escaped some of us here today. We were particularly struck by the information that Mr Whymper had once enjoyed the company of a tame toad that followed him round his garden.

Ian Smith spent many hours in the Scott Polar Research Institute researching Whymper's time in Greenland. It proved to be time well spent and points up Whymper's ill-starred relationship with Anthony Tegner and the self-seeking Robert Brown.

Neither does Ian Smith shy away from some of the less happy aspects of Whymper's life. He touches upon, not only the unhappy ending of Whymper's marriage to a woman 43 years his junior but reminds us that when the conqueror of the Matterhorn died alone, he had ensured that his wife and daughter were excluded from his will.

We are confident that *Shadow on the Matterhorn* will grace many book shelves as well as our own.

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The next book which had us turning its pages was *Murder in the Hindu Kush* by Tim Hannigan. *Murder in the Hindu Kush* is a rip roaring story of George Hayward's explorations in the Western Himalaya, his brushes with officialdom, his imprisonment in Turkestan and the conflicting stories surrounding his murder in the Hindu Kush. Like George Hayward, Hannigan adopts a brisk, business-like and unsentimental approach to his work.

This is a book that, like *Prelude to Everest*, offers an engaging and worthwhile story that makes the best out of surprisingly little source material. Hayward did not document his travels as fully as other Great Game activists, but Tim Hannigan seeks to overcome this difficulty by meticulous research of the available material and by following George Hayward's route into the Hindu Kush. This was a journey that allowed him to draw interesting comparisons between his own experiences and those recorded by Hayward.

When Hannigan, an 18 year old surfer and apprentice chef, accepted his father's invitation to accompany him to Pakistan, it led to a second visit and a growing interest in the geography and politics of Pakistan and their influence on 'The Great Game'. His third visit gave birth to *Murder in the Hindu Kush*.

That Hayward was a driven and foolhardy man, whose short life was not without incident, is well brought out, including his imprisonment by Yaqub Beg and his outrage at the massacre of women and children by the Maharajah of Kashmir's men. The books also touches upon the shady figure of Alexander Gardner and deals at length with the jealousy of the Victorian bigot Robert Shaw whose leisurely and massively provisioned caravan was in great contrast to Hayward's minimally equipped forays into unknown territory.

To understand what brought about Hayward's down fall – despite his award of the 1870 RGS Founders Medal – the reader needs to grasp the significance of his 9 May 1870 letter to

the Calcutta Pioneer – and Hannigan spells this out. Just over a month after the letter was published George Hayward’s throat was cut.

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The third of the shortlisted books we would like to comment on is *Freedom Climbers* by Bernadette McDonald which we felt to be one of the most important mountaineering books to be written for many years. *Freedom Climbers* is the story of how Polish climbers emerged after the 2nd World War and the rigours of the Russian occupation to discover, and then dominate, high altitude climbing in the 1970s and 1980s.

Bernadette McDonald draws upon her extensive interviews with climbers and their relations to paint a vivid picture of the stifling social, political and economic background faced by Polish climbing communities on their extraordinary journey from local outcrops and testing climbs in the Tatras to the highest, and most difficult climbs in the world. The author describes how this was achieved, not only by their toughness in the mountains, but also by how they turned the economic situation to their advantage by trading on their prestige value to the establishment and by creating a system within the system to allow them to travel outside their borders, experience new cultures and make a living from climbing that gave them what they valued most – freedom.

The book touches upon many issues including the rise of Solidarity and a meeting with Pope John Paul but concentrates on the social backgrounds, domestic circumstances and climbing careers of five of the country’s most outstanding climbers.

Though the book covers the extraordinary high altitude and Himalayan winter mountaineering achievements of Polish climbers, Bernadette McDonald concentrates on the personalities of the main activists. These are Wanda Rutkiewicz, Jerzy Kukuczka, Voytek Kurtyka, Andrzej Zawada and Krzysztof Wielicki. The author, in delving deep into the personality of Wanda Rutkiewicz, one of the world’s foremost female mountaineers, does not shy away from the sad and tragic elements of this driven woman’s life.

Freedom Climbers is meticulously researched and, by bringing together the stories of some of the key players, fills an important gap in the history of Polish Mountaineering written in English and will be compulsive reading for anyone with an interest in mountaineering history.

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The fourth book we shortlisted is *The Sound of Gravity* by Joe Simpson. The book opens with a graphic description of a mountain storm that may have many climbers in this room checking their belays. Had the lead climber checked his partner’s belay, Joe Simpson would not have had a story to tell and that would have been our loss as well as his. *The Sound of Gravity* took Joe Simpson nearly nine years to write. We think it was worth waiting for.

This powerfully-written, thought-provoking and atmospheric novel starts when his partner falls from a bivouac on a north wall during a ferocious Alpine storm. He saves neither his partner nor some of his fingers.

Twenty five years later his self-imposed penance is to act as a voluntary warden near the wall. There are other deaths on the mountain, well observed sketches of the mountain rescue team and an appearance of the type of arrogant, macho, young climber not yet extinct in some mountaineering circles. He realises that man's female companion is succumbing to hypothermia. He saves her but the hut is then battered by a cataclysmic and superbly described storm.

This is mountain literature that deals with loss, trauma and redemption in a compelling and convincing style but if you want to know how, and if, these issues are resolved, you will need to read the book yourself.

We found that Joe Simpson's book stayed with us long after we had turned the last page so, whatever your feelings about 'climbing novels', we urge you to read this one.

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The fifth, and final, book we were much taken by was *Desert Towers* by Steve 'Crusher' Bartlett. This is not a book for vertigo sufferers – the images of the towers are simply sensational, the photographs of the pioneer climbers invite a journey into another age and the descriptions of their first ascents are as gripping as the quality of much of the rock was suspect.

With some forty free and first clean ascents of desert towers between 1990 and 2009, British born Steve Bartlett is no stranger to his subject and has assembled a collection of images and tales of American achievement that will appeal to any climber fortunate enough to find themselves standing beneath these marvels of erosion.

This is a lavishly illustrated, affectionate and engaging history of one hundred years of climbing on the sandstone towers of the Colorado Plateau, informed by the author's own experiences of the towers, his conversations with many of the activists and by some 30 carefully chosen essays, some new, but most culled from a range of American magazines and climbing journals, supplemented by the author's own contributions in a style that can only be described as infectiously entertaining.

This book, like *Freedom Climbers*, has an impressive cast list, with appearances by the likes of Layton Kor, Chuck Pratt and Fred Beckey. The images of the first ascensionists are well chosen and, despite the age of some of them, extremely well reproduced.

Steve Bartlett's notes on Native American History in general and the Navajo people in particular are an illuminating addition to the text and offer an explanation as to why climbing on many of the towers that stand in Navajo territory has been banned since the early 1970s.

This is a book that will look well on any coffee table sturdy enough to take its weight. We suggest that an investment in such a table will be well rewarded.

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We have enjoyed all of these books but were charged with choosing a winner. This we did, but, once again, with no small difficulty.

The winner of the 2011 Boardman Tasker Prize for Mountain Literature is Bernadette McDonald with *Freedom Climbers*.

Barry Imeson
18 November 2011