

Boardman Tasker Award Chair of Judges' Speech 2016

Members and family of the Boardman Tasker Charitable Trust, Distinguished and famous people, Ladies and Gentlemen and of course climbers.
Good afternoon

Once again we have been presented with a very healthy number of submissions from around the world for the annual Boardman Tasker award for Mountain Literature. This can only reflect on the success and prestige attributed to this award.

As you are no doubt aware, the award is for mountain literature and not just mountaineering. This is a broad brief and this year provided the judges with some 35 entries from across the mountain spectrum. I would at this point like to thank my fellow and highly qualified judges, Helen Mort and Terry Gifford for their sterling efforts, deliberations and guidance. Although I am just a climber with a poor taste in shirts and with no literary pedigree I would hasten to add that, despite popular belief, I can read and have not just looked at the pictures.

However my IT skills are obviously lacking as my laptop died on Tuesday morning with my un-backed up BT speech on it. I would like to thank the Colwyn Bay Computer shop for coaxing the speech off its hard drive two days later.

The task presented to us was daunting and was not made easier by many books arriving just before the deadline – which as you know is in prime outdoor climbing season. As you can imagine even making a short list from such a wealth of worthy material was immensely challenging. Indeed the short list could quite easily have been a long list. It would seem appropriate to mention some of the other titles were submitted.

The simple poetic beauty of **Glen Denny's** words in **Valley Walls** that painted such a vivid picture of the Golden era of Yosemite climbing and so complimented his extraordinary photographic records of that time.

The long awaited Magnum Opus of **Doug Scott's life and times – volume 1**. It did not disappoint, through his raw and gritty apprenticeship to his achievements in the Alps and greater ranges. All thoughtfully documented in impressive detail.

Parallel this with the punk rock star, **Andy Pollitt**. Equally driven in his early youth to reach the top of his game. Likewise **Kenny – Mr. Cool** himself and **Catherine Destivelle** both providing the stories behind their legendary status.

And then pit them against the excellently crafted short stories of **Dave Pickford's After the Crash**, and **Ken Crocket's** labour of love in **Mountaineering in Scotland**, and **Mateo Cabello's** wonderful research and revelations in **Of Mountains and Men**.

But a short list by definition has to be short, and in the end we settled on five books. And I am delighted that so many of those involved with them are here in person to add substance to the gathering.

And so to the five short listed books.

Alex Honnold – Alone on the wall

I guess we've all done a bit of soloing in our time. It strips us bare and exposes us to our mental and physical frailties, and rewards us with the heightened sense of freedom and emotions we crave from climbing. But most of the time we are just paddling with our wellies on. We deceive ourselves by soloing well within our comfort zone. And then along comes someone who solos within an ace of their ability, at levels we only dream of. The audacity is terrifying. How can he do it? How can he control things that we can't? What is it in his make up that allows him to go so close? Alex answers this with "for me, the crucial question is not how to climb without fear - that's impossible - but how to deal with it when it creeps into your nerve endings".

Alex's book, so skillfully knitted together by Dave Roberts, gives us an insight into the man behind the deeds. As Alex peels back and analyses the layers you discover a person who is obviously talented, thoughtful, honest, funny, modest and one who cares about the world that surrounds him. For someone who is always in the media spotlight because of his achievements, he is remarkably unsullied by all the hype preferring his simple and uncomplicated van life – which is probably where he is right now. But above all he comes across as still just the climber, summed up in his book when asked by a journalist whether he could stop climbing for stretches at a time he answered 'Sure', to which the journalist replied 'You mean you could go for, say, a whole month without climbing' to which Alex blurted out 'Hell no! I thought you meant three days'.

Mark Vallance - Wild Country – The Man who made Friends

This is, as the title so aptly states, the story of the Man who made Friends. Friends, the single most revolutionary protection device in climbing history. Friends, important people to have in your life. Mark chronicles his rich and absorbing life story, and how seeing the Mount Everest film in 1953 was a life changing event that made him want to be a climber. He can have had no idea how that was to lead to him influencing so much in the climbing world. Mark's determination and belief in taking the opportunities and overcoming the obstacles that life throws at us comes across strongly and epitomizes his character. The formation of Wild Country to become one of the strongest manufacturing brands, the creation of Outside and of the ground breaking Foundry climbing wall, together with his work with the BMC, are all testament to his drive. A climber always at heart he candidly reveals what it takes to achieve so much. The behind the scenes business struggles and tussles, the satisfaction of success, of friendships won and lost, the onset and coping with Parkinson's disease are all there. His stoicism is summed up by his description of getting to a tricky section on a climb on the Triolet: 'I had climbed myself into this. I would just have to climb myself out of it.'

Mark is an exceptional person whose spirit in dealing with life shines throughout his book.

Simon McCartney – The Bond

One of the first books my mother gave when she realised that I had every intention of continuing climbing was Dave Roberts' book Mountain of my Fear, about the 1965 ascent of the West face of Mount Huntington, price 5 shillings 2nd hand. Whether to inspire me or deter me I'll never know. Simon and Jack's descent of Mount Huntington by the route I had been so in awe of many years ago was very poignant to me.

Simon's book is an astonishing recollection of events with the benefit of time passed. In it you will find the driving obsession and seeming invincibility of youth, the freedom and lack of responsibilities, and joy of being on the cutting edge. The love of life and pain of suffering. The risk of everything. But above all Simon centres on the relationship between climbing partners, in particular Jack Roberts. Simon and Jack were early exponents of the light and fast approach to alpine ascents. The narrative is captivating and enhanced with extracts from Jack's journal that emphasizes the bond between them. The almost claustrophobic closeness of shared experiences as they pushed the envelope to the utter limits.

Simon June 14th on Denali

"I cannot think clearly. I try to talk to Jack because I should. I see him fretting over his frostbitten feet and try and think of something to say to support him. I try and form a sentence in my mind because I seem to have difficulty in just talking...I have forgotten where I started and stay mute. All I can do is to look at him and hope he can hear me thinking."

Jack June 18th

"Simon is completely helpless, he cannot even tell the difference between push my sleeves or pull my sleeves. I hate to berate him, but this is a pure survival situation and I have to survive for both of us as he can't do anything. It's not fair. Why am I always the stronger and my partner the weaker?"

For Simon it would appear that reaching this limit would cause him to explore to different horizons, whilst for Jack it was the only life.

This book portrays life on the very edge of existence.

Steve Olson – Eruption

On Sunday the 18th May 1980, Mount St. Helens erupted and so demonstrated to the world the cataclysmic power of nature that broods below the fragile skin of our planet.

Eruption is a totally absorbing story that provides us with a well-researched journalistic documentary from all perspectives, of events leading up to that day and the aftermath and its consequences.

Steve's skill for us was in managing to combine the history and politics of logging and conservation with the intimate personal stories of those who died, in a style that reads like a thriller. He moves from the science to the sadly complacent weekend campers with a deft momentum and seamless concern. Indeed, the poor scientist who was monitoring the eruption, must, says Steve, 'have known that he wouldn't live' when he called into Vancouver 'This is it!' His car, the caravan he was staying in and he himself were never found. As a

documentation of human attitudes towards a single mountain this book is an outstandingly readable and a rather moving achievement.

The poetry embedded in the language of 'Eruption' is summed up by the passage describing the erupting Mount St Helens: *'The ash cloud looked like an immense blanket being dragged over the sky from west to east. Great bulbous projections, like mammatus clouds but larger and darker, hung from the bottom of the cloud.... ..ash began to sift from the sky.'*

This book reminds us that a mountain is not something that we exploit unendingly for pleasure or commercial interests. The impermanence of our world is evident from the reading of this book.

The forces of nature are rebuilding and revitalizing the area, as indeed is the human population – 'at least until' as Steve points out 'the next eruption.'

Robert Wainwright - The Maverick Mountaineer

This is a biography of a man, George Ingle Finch that had to be told and now has to be read. Finch's historical importance to mountaineering and science is adeptly replayed through the well-crafted and engaging style of Robert's writing. Finch's unsettled and unconventional upbringing culminated in producing one of the most talented yet eccentric mountaineers and scientists of his day. Robert portrays Finch as a maverick who has little time for traditions and often finds himself the outsider in conflict with the establishment. The attitudes the Alpine Club of the day, their prejudices' and scheming's against Finch leave you with a feeling of injustice. There is some vindication when he reaches 27,000 ft. on Everest in 1922 with the help of his bottled oxygen system and of his humanity in turning back when so tantalizingly close to the summit to save his partner.

Interspersed throughout the book, the complexities of Finch's character are examined through his complex private life and relationships, especially with his son, the actor Peter Finch.

Robert's well-honed skills as a biographer are clear and he holds the reader's attention throughout allowing them a fascinating insight into this remarkable and influential man.

So as you can see our task of selecting a winner from such a varied and commendable short list was not easy.

The well-deserved winner is a book epitomizes so much that we share in the mountains. I am delighted to announce that the 2016 Boardman Tasker Award for Mountain Literature goes to...

*At the actual event Graham then went on to say.....Simon Bond!
Followed by throwing up his arms and saying Aaaargh.....!*

**The winner of the 2016 Boardman Tasker Award for Mountain Literature
is Simon McCartney, for his book 'The Bond',
published by Vertebrate Publishing, Sheffield.**