



Denis E. Cosgrove, Veronica Della Dora, eds. *High Places: Cultural Geographies of Mountains, Ice and Science*. London: I. B. Tauris, 2009. xiv + 273 pp. \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84511-616-3; \$29.50 (paper), ISBN 978-1-84511-617-0.



Reviewed by Elizabeth Baigent

Published on H-HistGeog (April, 2009)

Commissioned by Robert J. Mayhew (University of Bristol)

Highs (and Lows)

The high places that this book considers are those at high elevation (mountains) and at high latitudes (the Arctic and Antarctic). Considering the two together is not novel (Mount Everest was classically considered the third pole, representing with the North and South poles the great challenges to explorers of the twentieth century), but it is interesting and thought provoking. These high places have proved enduringly evocative and have been imbued with cultural significance to a remarkable degree. This book does not seek a common understanding of the very different high places it considers, but suggests something of the variety of responses to them. It also considers the representation in narrative, maps, paintings, and diagrams, which gives meaning to human interactions in these extreme physical environments. A division of the essays into those about elevated and those about high latitude places would have been the obvious organizing structure, but the editors choose an altogether more interesting one, presenting in the book's first half considerations of high places by people drawn in from outside as scientists or explorers, and in the second half

investigations of high places from the perspective of the local people to whom these places are home and livelihood. They are to be commended for this perspective, though their (unexplained) decision to present Westerners' views first leaves the most original material hidden from the casual reader.

The first half of the collection is in large part molded by David Livingstone's calls for attention to the geography of science, that is, to the places of significance for scientific practice and discourse. Attention to the places where scientific knowledge is made, and the places to and from which it disseminates (and the sites where it does not) can reveal much about that knowledge—the forms it assumes; the practices it depends on; and those who make, share, and receive it. Livingstone's ideas have been productively seized on by many, inside and outside geography, but they have given rise here to a rather uneven set of essays.

The collection opens with an account by William Fox of how people in general, and he in particular, per-

ceive, understand, and respond to volcanic landscapes at a range of latitudes: this was pleasant enough reading for a Sunday newspaper travel column, but oddly out of place in what is marketed as a scholarly collection of essays. This contribution is followed by an extended version of John Wylie's article "Becoming-icy: Scott and Amundsen's South Polar Voyages, 1910-1913." [1] There are those of us who thought the original article quite long enough, particularly since the author felt able to explore Roald Amundsen's feelings despite apparently being unable to read what Amundsen had written (Norwegian polar memoirs work very differently from Anglophone ones, and relying on translations is unsatisfactory and unscholarly). Wylie's original article is here interspersed with accounts of how the author actually did his reading. We learn that his journey to Cambridge seemed like a journey to the very ends of the earth and about his daily marches to the library (pp. 34, 38). All very wittily ironic no doubt, but increasingly adolescent as we end his encounter with his chicken tikka sandwich on the return journey. Something intelligent could have been made of the irony, an examination perhaps of the interplay of nostalgia and irony in the Edwardian approach to death, but this was evidently too much to hope for. Similarly, while the undifferentiated mix of quotations from memoirs and novels about the South was doubtless intended as a richly evocative mosaic, I was irritated by errors of fact that crept in: the description (culled from a novel) of Edward Wilson's attitude to nature as "pantheistic," for example, is plain wrong, as a reading of Wilson's own writing (not cited) would rapidly have shown.

Wylie's contribution is followed by that of Kathryn Yusoff, who interestingly examines some of the optical and physiological challenges to practices of observation at high latitude, though her claim that "Antarctica constitutes a privileged site for critical thinking about vision and its relationship to the establishment of geographical truths" seems to dismiss without examination the healthy claims of other regions (p. 62). Similarly, her account of the relationship between Charles Wilkes's scientific report of his Antarctic voyage and Edgar Allan Poe's story about a similar voyage, which is presented as fact, though most interesting, seems to exaggerate the novelty of this device, known at least since the example of Selkirk/Rogers and Crusoe/Defoe. I much enjoyed the endnotes to this chapter, which, word for word, were far more informative than the text and more invitingly (because more plainly) written.

We continue with Heather Frazar's account of the

Greenland Ice Sheet Project Two ice core, a two-mile long, 5.2-inch-diameter cylinder of ice extracted in central Greenland between 1987 and 1993. The core itself is remarkable enough to sustain interest through a somewhat labored account of its origin, extraction, transport, storage, and use. The subjects of the photographs were most engaging, although their technical quality (stills from videos shot by the author) was truly lamentable. Again, I found the endnotes in many places more pleasing than the text.

The intellectual pace picks up markedly with Bernard Debarbieux's consideration of Philippe Buache's and Alexander von Humboldt's very different conceptions of geography and nature, and humanity's place within nature. This was a pleasure to read: assured, scholarly, well exemplified with original diagrams and quotations, and perceptive. His account of the two men's work elegantly illustrates the supersession of *géographie de cabinet* by empirical geography. The chapter is linked to the book's overall theme by a consideration of the two men's understanding of the term "mountain." The term was used by Buache to connote features whose importance derived from their place in his theoretical scheme, not from their own prominence in the landscape. (Further linguistic discussion reveals the term to have had yet other contemporary meanings linked, for example, to practices of pasturing animals.) The author argues that von Humboldt's approach was characterized not only by the primacy he accorded empirical observation but also by his deeper, Goethian sense of the harmony in the ordering of the forms and forces of nature and humanity. The endnotes show the author's ease in both the Francophone and Anglophone literatures, and many texts he cites will be new to and of great interest to many readers.

We press on to Veronica della Dora's chapter on Mount Athos, which proves to be another scholarly piece that draws on her wide reading: her references drawing on French, German, English, and Greek sources will be very valuable to other readers. She considers Mount Athos as a garden of use and ornament, a site of scientific investigation and spiritual reflection, a natural Eden, and a cabinet of curiosities. The fine illustrations enrich the understanding of the mountain, its inhabitants, and its visitors, whose encounters are engagingly analyzed in prose that draws the reader in. The visitors are Oxonian John Sibthorp impelled by classical learning and a Linnean impulse to investigate and classify; August Grisebach, a pupil of von Humboldt, whose task was to analyze and chart the distribution of vegetation up the slopes and to gain insights thereby into large-scale order in the nat-

ural world; and Arthur Hill and W. B. Turrill, who sought to identify ecosystems, living communities of plants and animals in particular places. For all of these men, as for the monks who make their home there, the mountain epitomizes the right relation of humankind, nature, and some kind of transcendent order. This is a good essay from an accomplished scholar.

On to K. Maria D. Lane's consideration of early twentieth-century American astronomical observatories, particularly with respect to their observations of Mars. She argues, following Livingstone's ideas, that in judging the merits of various locations of observatories, astronomers regarded mountain locations as outstanding not only in terms of practical advantage consequent on such things as the purity of the air but also for reasons to do with the cultural significance of these elevated positions. The pioneer astronomer, foregoing the soft charms of eastern and midwestern city observatories to work in his rugged mountain station in the West, claimed the moral as well as the scientific high ground, and efforts were made to undermine opposing views by claiming the superiority of the sublime locations of the observatories and the manly qualities of their observers. This was another well-written, well-illustrated, and convincing essay on a topic of wide interest, and brings the first half of the book to a fine conclusion.

The second half of the book opens with another interesting essay, by Gilles Rudaz, on those who live in the Valaisian Alps of Switzerland—what has become the quintessential Swiss region. There are echoes in text and references of Debarbieux's work as Rudaz considers how the local people have seen themselves, their landscape, and their labor as the thing that connects the two, in the face of changing appraisals from outsiders. The author did not draw connections between changes in this region and the wider phenomenon of nature becoming a spiritual resource for outsiders, rather than the means of daily life for locals, and nor did he situate the discussion in wider debates about the change from a peasant system to a capitalist one: but it was nonetheless an interesting topic handled well. The prose sometimes struggled to work in English but translating back into French was good intellectual exercise.

In the next pair of chapters, Michael T. Bravo and Richard Powell consider the relation between western (Qallunaat) and Inuit culture in the high Canadian Arctic with particular concern first to sea ice and its mapping, and second to the celebration of Canada Day in Resolute. Relations can sometimes be fraught in an arena in

which geopolitical, strategic, and scientific concerns are played out in the context of the needs of local people to pursue the livelihoods that through daily and seasonal practices affirm culture and community relations, name places, and reproduce language. Both chapters provide perceptive accounts of resistance and accommodation in this extreme environment.

They are followed by Jong-Heon Jin's account of indigenous and colonial ways of representing and understanding Paektudaegan, a mountain ridge that has traditionally been considered the sacred spine of Korea, but that was later, following the exploration of Japanese geologist and geographer Koto Bunjio, laid bare—*anatomized* perhaps—in pursuit of geological and geomorphological science, which had its roots in Europe. The holistic and in some senses spiritually determined indigenous practice is contrasted with the colonial practice, which tries to deconstruct the landscape and treat it scientifically, though it is of course not free from cultural and political influences. Though the chapter has appeared before in the Anglophone literature, it was new to me, and I suspect will be so to most other readers, and was a most welcome widening of the geographical scope of debate. There was a fundamental irony to the piece in that the author, in challenging colonial views of Korea and in drawing attention to recent efforts to reinvigorate a Korean view of the mountain by walking along the mountain ridge in preference to scaling individual peaks, relied heavily on Eurocentric theoretical and other literature (Bruno Latour and others). The initial (Western-inspired) theoretical part was pretty turgid, but where the author focused on the really new matter of indigenous Korean practice the intellectual pace picked up significantly. There were places where a European comparison would have been welcome, for example, the intriguing suggestion in an eighteenth-century Korean geography text that the nation's territory should be regarded as a living organism was described as *poetic* and by implication rather attractive (p. 210). A comparison with wholly unattractive European articulation of the same idea would have been illuminating. I was sorry that the captions on the most interesting maps were so poor that their message became rather opaque: I and no doubt other readers would have greatly benefited from a translation of the Korean and Japanese legends and more detail about the provenance and circulation of the maps.

The collection closes with an afterword by J. Nicholas Entrikin, which briefly considers Henry David Thoreau's encounter with a New England mountain (let), during which Entrikin tells us twice that Thoreau does not

have much to do with the theme of the book. Unfortunately, he then moves on to Latour and Robert Sack in a rather myopic essay that brings attention back to Western human geography's current existential anguish just when the imagination had begun to break out of these confines.

All in all, this collection brings together some interesting ideas that gain from their juxtaposition. It works best when the authors have uppermost in their minds their historical and present-day actors and their audiences, and least when the authors become self absorbed and self important. It would have benefited from much tighter editing to prune or ditch the sillier chapters; in particular, the decision to cluster the weakest chapters at the front of the book was surely misguided as many people will not make it through to the good and original material languishing to the middle and rear. The decision to end on a limp note was similarly regrettable. The editors

might also have been more exacting about the quality of the illustrations, their captions, and the prose. The theoretical introductions of several of the chapters seemed dutiful rather than inspiring, and the authors seemed somewhat relieved to get on with what they were really trying to say. It seems probable that the tragic and untimely death of the first editor, Denis Cosgrove, might have contributed to the book's slightly unfinished air. So, following E. M. Forster, two cheers, or at least a cheer and a half, for this book, and commendations to the publisher for showing that there is both a market for and an academic point to a series of book-length texts in historical geography.

Note

[1]. John Wylie, "Becoming-icy: Scott and Amundsen's South Polar Voyages, 1910-1913," *Cultural Geographies* 9 (2002): 249-265.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-histgeog>

Citation: Elizabeth Baigent. Review of Cosgrove, Denis E.; Della Dora, Veronica, eds, *High Places: Cultural Geographies of Mountains, Ice and Science*. H-HistGeog, H-Net Reviews. April, 2009.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24600>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.