

Thursday, 06 March 2025 – David Hopkins

The 2003 Boardman Tasker Prize for Mountain Literature

It is a great personal pleasure for me to be presenting the Boardman Tasker Prize for Mountain Literature for 2003. Pete and Joe were of my generation and, although always 'one of us', they stood head and shoulders over their contemporaries both in terms of their ability and commitment, and their contribution to the broader development of mountaineering. I feel myself particularly fortunate to have been a friend of Peter's. He was the assessor on all three of my Mountain Guide assessments and we were among the first ten British mountain guides to receive the International Mountain Guides carnet in 1978. I remember vividly standing in a friend's kitchen in Vancouver with tears in my eyes hearing the news of their disappearance on Everest, and then many years later in the Tien Shan holding Valeri Khrichtchaty's hand as we talked about his recent discovery of Peter's body high on the North-East Ridge.

Of course Pete and Joe were stunningly good and ambitious mountaineers, and of course their ascents pointed the way to a more ethical approach to climbing mountains. Their real legacy, however, is that they opened a window on mountaineering and exposed an aspect of the sport that few had even glimpsed before. Through their example, their speeches and above all their writing they not only re-defined what was possible in a pure style on the highest mountains of the world, but also and unapologetically disclosed the emotions, values, beauty and hardship that inevitably accompany such encounters. Their honesty, authenticity and insight were an inspiration not just to my generation - they set a style, a standard and an attitude that is still influencing those mountaineers who are performing at the margins of the sport.

It is for these reasons that the Boardman Tasker Prize is so important. It recognises not just quality mountain writing, but mountain writing with style,

commitment and chutzpah. So the criteria we set ourselves in judging this year's prize were much in line with the ethic of Pete and Joe's mountaineering and writing. Was the submission exceedingly well written, does it celebrate essential mountaineering values, and does it point to an even more exciting and authentic future? Subjecting ourselves to the discipline of these criteria meant that reviewing this year's contributions was no easy task. I am therefore indebted to the sensitivity, insight and compassion of my colleagues, Eric Major and Chris Smith whose commitment to mountaineering is matched by their literary good sense and acumen. In what follows I speak also for them.

As in previous years, a wide variety of titles have been submitted for the 2003 Boardman Tasker Prize for Mountain Literature. Unsurprisingly this year a number of the submissions reflect some aspect of climbing on Everest. The seventeen entries this year include novels, philosophical reflection, histories and portrayals of mountainous areas, biography, travelogues and a book by Audrey Salkeld written specifically for children.

In selecting this year's Boardman Tasker Prize shortlist we adhered carefully to the guidelines provided by the Trustees and the criteria I mentioned earlier. In our opinion six books merit inclusion on the shortlist. I will now briefly review them in alphabetical order of author.

Everest: the official history – **George Band (HarperCollins)** is written by one of the members of the successful 1953 British Everest Expedition and is sponsored by the Mount Everest Foundation in association with the Alpine Club and the Royal Geographical Society. George Band provides an engaging and unique perspective on the mountain, and illustrates its grip on the imagination of the climber and the general public with superb photographs and maps. In describing the attempts to climb Everest since the early twenties to the present day, Band also documents the changing styles and attitudes towards the challenge of climbing the world's highest mountain.

***Tenzing, Hero of Everest* – Ed Douglas (National Geographic)** is a comprehensive biography of one of the great heroes of the twentieth century. In describing Tenzing's life and times, Douglas also provides an authoritative account of the extraordinary contribution the Sherpa people have made to the development of Himalayan mountaineering. Douglas well documents Tenzing's striving for recognition and equality among European climbers, how he taught himself by observation to be a competent high-altitude mountaineer, and provides candid and at times salutary glimpses into Tenzing's private and public life.

***Yosemite* – Alexander Huber and Heinz Zak (Baton Wicks)** is a strikingly beautiful celebration of what many regard as the world mecca of rock climbing. Although it is initially Zak's photographs that almost literally take one's breath away, these stunning images are well complemented by Huber's text that is clean and simple, much like architecture of one of El Capitan's soaring dihedrals. The book presents a portrait of Yosemite that is measured yet affectionate, giving a balanced view of the development of climbing in this crucible of excellence over the past fifty years. Originally published in Germany the English translation is both crisp and vivid.

***Mountains of the Mind* – Robert Macfarlane (Granta Books)** is a stylishly written account of our continuing love affair with mountains. In this scholarly review of the European romantics' fascination with the Alps, Robert Macfarlane explores the variety of motivations that lead us to mountainous places, among them fear, the challenge of exploration, and the beauty of the wilderness landscape. The book begins and ends with reference to George Mallory who, to Macfarlane, is the iconic mountaineer who binds together in one individual the complex of passions that continue to drive us to the highest of mountains and the margins of human endeavour.

***The Fall* – Simon Mawer (Little, Brown)** encompasses a great swathe of British mountaineering from rock climbing in North Wales, to Himalayan expeditions and alpine ascents such as the Eiger North Face. It also succeeds where most climbing novels fail. *The Fall* works as an investigation

into what constitutes love, friendship and betrayal, and as an authentic account of what it is like to climb and what it is like to be a climber. Where *The Fall* is most impressive is that the one element does not suffocate the other, indeed both complement each other in illustrating the ultimate futility of climbing, the tawdriness of instant gratification and the illusion of success.

My Father, Sandy – Nicholas Wollaston (Short Books) is an affectionate and engaging biography by a son of the father he never knew. Written some seventy years after his father died, Nicholas Wollaston has produced a memoir of elegance and sensitivity that also provides an insightful and textured account of the life of the middle-class adventurer at the turn of the last century. Although his father was more of an explorer than a mountaineer, Wollaston's book gives us an alternative perspective on what motivated the first generation of Himalayan pioneers, particularly those on the 1921 Everest expedition.

Despite such a strong shortlist we found it relatively easy to select a winner. We were unanimous in choosing a book that captures the essence of the climbing experience, celebrates the challenge that mountaineering uniquely provides and is sensitive to the demands the mountains place upon those who venture on them. It is a book that faithfully portrays the history of British mountaineering over the past half century and also provides a striking insight into the frailties of character of those involved. In exploring the motivation, personality and drive of those who climb, it presents such an uncompromising and accurate analysis that, in recognising the patterns, many of us will feel distinctly uncomfortable. Although primarily focusing on climbing and the climber, the book also locates the 'mountain spirit' within a broader societal and historical context and so confronts the wider range of challenges that beset the climbing personality. It is therefore a book that works on many levels and, as such, will appeal both to the extreme mountaineer and to those who rarely visit the hills. I refer of course to one the best climbing novels that any of the three of us has read - ***The Fall*** by Simon Mawer, the winner of this year's Boardman Tasker Award.