

The White Ladder: Triumph and Tragedy at the Dawn of Mountaineering

Book Review - by Ken Thomson

If you have never had the time or energy to read all those hefty books by or about the early world mountain explorers, from von Humboldt through Whymper and Conway, to the Duke of Abruzzi and Mallory, this is the book for you: a compendium of 24 short chapters about these and other famous (and one or two not-so-famous) names and their attempts at the world altitude record (the “Ladder”). In loose chronological order into the first half of the twentieth century, Light takes us through their efforts at high altitude, skipping most of the tedious details of funding, organisation and approach, and focussing on physical achievements in attempting some of the highest summits in the world. As well, he covers the often-fraught relationships between climbers, rival parties, hired porters and sometimes governments. Of particular Club interest are the sections on Norman Collie and Alexander Kellas (a chapter is even entitled ‘Fearlas Mor’, with the usual Macdui tale included), which covers the modest Kellas’s unusually close and appreciative relationship with his Sherpas, e.g. in breaking the world’s summit record on Pauhunri (23,375 feet) in 1911.

Other, and sometimes less admirable, characters include the ambitious but racist Fanny Bullock Workman (the first female mountaineer to get above 20,000 feet); the ‘unorthodox’ Scot Aleister Crowley (who some say was mad, and was certainly high-handed, bisexual and occultist); Charles Granville Bruce (leader of three Himalayan expeditions), who after moraine-hopping for days on end in 1892, wrote that this was ‘one of the finest trials to the temper that exists [and which] as a destroyer of respectable language, beats golf hollow’; and Arnold Henry Lander, who “had measured the summit of Mount Lumpa at a record-breaking 23,490 feet; he and his party had gained – then lost – almost 10,000 feet of elevation in a single day. All without climbing equipment of any kind and in boots ‘such as I would wear in London on a wet day’”.

At a cheap price, and with nearly 50 illustrations, over 200 references and an index, this is a useful as well as an entertaining book.

The White Ladder: Daniel Light, Norton, 2025. 432pp. ISBN 9781324066217. Under £20 hardback).