



Mountain Dialogues From Antiquity to Modernity. Edited by Dawn Hollis and Jason König

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Source: Mountain Research and Development, 42(1)

Published By: International Mountain Society

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1659/mrd.mm269.1>

Mountain Dialogues From Antiquity to Modernity

Edited by Dawn Hollis and Jason König. London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. xii + 255 pp. Hardcover: US\$ 108.00, ISBN 978-1-3501-6282-2. ePDF: US\$ 86.40, ISBN 978-1-3501-6283-9. E-book: US\$ 86.40, ISBN 978-1-3501-6284-6.

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In 1948, the pathbreaking literary scholar Marjorie Hope Nicolson delivered a series of lectures at Cornell University in the United States titled “The Sublime in External Nature.” These lectures were reworked and published a little over a decade later as the extremely influential book *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite*. Building on some ideas of the 19th-century English author John Ruskin, Nicolson argued, “[d]uring the first seventeen centuries of the Christian era, ‘Mountain Gloom’ so clouded human eyes that never for a moment did poets see mountains in the full radiance to which our eyes have become accustomed. Within a century . . . all this was changed. The ‘Mountain Glory’ dawned, then shone full splendor. Why? . . . It was the result of one of the most profound revolutions in thought that has ever occurred” (Nicolson 1959: 3).

Seventy years after Nicolson’s original lectures, a dozen scholars from the United Kingdom, the United States, Germany, and Sweden working in fields such as classics, English literature, German literature, and history came together in Scotland for a workshop. The papers from that workshop are collected in this volume. The editors’ introduction states, “[t]he aim of this volume . . . is to consciously step out of the shadow of mountain gloom and glory” (p 5). The editors explain, “our hypothesis in this volume is that the gloom-glory model leads to a vastly oversimplified image of premodern mountain engagement” (pp 3–4). The volume’s contributors also hope that their works will “serve as an exemplar for the ongoing study of mountains in past contexts” (p 16), “challenge our sense of a linear narrative of mountain history” (p 10), and “emphasize what is distinctive about responses to mountains in different cultures and periods” by proposing a dialogue “between responses to mountains from different periods, and between the methodologies of different disciplines” (p 5).

Perhaps not surprisingly, given that the volume was published in the Bloomsbury Academic Press series “Ancient Environments” (whose series preface states it “sets out to

explore . . . different constructions of the ‘environment’ and understandings of humankind’s place within it, across and around the Mediterranean from 3500 BCE–750 CE”; p ix), one clear theme in (many of) the chapters is later authors’ relationships with ancient precedents. However, most of the examples studied in this volume date from periods after the chronological parameters listed in the series preface. The final chapter, for example, by historian Peter H. Hansen, takes the story of the (in)famous Mt Ventoux (which, due to Petrarch’s famous 14th-century account of his ascent of it, casts almost as long of a shadow over this book as Nicolson’s work does) all the way up to the 1990 UNESCO declaration of Ventoux as a “biosphere reserve” (p 224). The decentering of the Alps in the story of Europeans’ intellectual grapplings with mountains stands as an important contribution of this volume as well, together with an analysis of sources other than the English ones that were so dear to Nicolson.

The book under review here should be placed in the larger project of mountain studies, an interdisciplinary academic undertaking that the editors inform us has “attracted increasing attention over the past decade or so, especially in the sciences and social sciences, driven by pressing contemporary concerns” (p 1). The editors point to this journal, founded in 1981, as a forum for research in the field, as well as the Mountain Legacy Project and the triennial “Thinking Mountains Interdisciplinary Summits” hosted by the University of Alberta (p 1, fnn 2 and 4). With a few illustrations (including paintings, a historical map, and 2 photographs), a common bibliography, and an index, the book is clearly more of an academic undertaking than a popular one, but given the tremendous variety of the topics covered in this collection, even non-specialists can expect to find something of potential interest, from classical myths to late antique or medieval religious figures, from early modern English legends to 18th- and 19th-century travelers’ accounts, to the US politician Thomas Jefferson’s renowned mountain retreat Monticello.

It is of course not possible to give much detail in this short review. Because the book is not chronologically arranged, it might present challenges to many readers. The heterogeneous nature of the sources analyzed and the (intentional) lack of any methodological orthodoxy might be a bit disconcerting to some as well. However, even the pieces on the oft-studied Alps, by classicist Dan Hooley on the Zurich Humanist Conrad Gessner (1516–1565) and by the Germanist Sean Ireton on the long history of the reception of Josias Simler’s 1574 work on that mountain range, provide evidence of an interaction with mountain landscapes that leads in “nuanced continuity” (Hooley, p 21) to the later familiar Romantic appreciation. Ireton’s fascinating juxtaposition of W. A. B. Coolidge’s 1904 translation of Simler’s earlier work gives evidence that Coolidge recognized the nuanced relationship with the Swiss mountainsides found in the earlier author’s groundbreaking book.

The overall impression conveyed by the variety presented in this volume successfully challenges Marjorie Hope Nicolson’s sweeping generalizations of 7 decades ago about

the trek from “gloom to glory.” Although not easy to traverse, this volume’s contributions to the project of complicating the story of the intellectual impacts of mountains on people over the last 2,400 years (or so) is well worth the attempt.

REFERENCE

Marjorie Hope Nicolson. 1997. *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite*. Reprint (1st edition 1959). Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press.