Maurice Isserman and Stewart Weav-
er's authoritative history of Himalayan
mountaineering, Fallen Giants, starts
right at the beginning, 45 million years
ago, with the collision of tectonic plates
that threw up what the authors call
"the greatest geophysical feature of the
earth." The Andes are the longest of
the planet's mountain chains, but the
Himalaya and its adjacent ranges, the
Karakoram and the Hindu Kush, are
far higher. They contain all fourteen
of the world's peaks over eight thousand
meters, or 26,247 feet; their northern
rampart averages 19,685 feet—some
two thousand feet higher than the
Andes—and they are still growing: "To
this day India plows into Tibet at the
breakneck speed of five centimeters a
year and lifts the Himalaya by as much
as a centimeter."

That little detail is characteristic of
the book. Both authors are enthusias-
tic mountaineers who climb regularly
in the United States and have gone
trekking in the Himalaya, but they
climb for pleasure, not for a living.
Away from the hills, they are histori-
ans—Isserman has written extensively
about American communism and the
New Left. Weaver's field is British
imperial history and English liberal-
ism—and they bring their professional
skills and discipline to the subject in
the form of meticulous research and a
painstaking attention to detail. Fallen
Giants is a big book in every sense—
nearly 460 pages of text, eighty-five
pages of notes, and a twenty-five-page
bibliography—and the authors' politi-
cal take on the subject makes it unlike
most other mountain histories.

Political historians do not usually
bother with a subject as apolitical and
seemingly frivolous as climbing, al-
though mountaineering books are now
accumulating as relentlessly as the Hi-
malaya itself. A mere half-century ago,
mountain climbing was still a minori-
ty pastime for an eccentric few who
took pleasure in doing things the hard
way, in steep places and bad weather,
and were willing to risk injury or death
in the process. Since risk and the
adrenaline high that went with it were
an essential part of its appeal, climbing
was regarded as questionable, slightly
antisocial activity. As a result, climb-
ers wrote about where they had been
and what they had done, but they wrote
mostly for other climbers and a rela-
tively limited audience of armchair ad-
venturers who preferred to be thrilled,
or to suffer, by proxy.

Not anymore. In the years since 1953,
when Edmund Hillary and Tenzin-
ing Norgay first reached the summit of
Everest, mountaineering, rock clim-
bing, and mountain tourism—a ka
trekking—have been transformed into
a mainstream sport of armchair ad-
venturers who preferred to be thrilled,
or to suffer, by proxy.

The Victorians were responsible
for turning the Alps into what Leslie
Stephens called "the playground of
Europe," but it was an exclusive play-
ground for a limited few. One hundred
and fifty years later, the Himalaya is
in danger of becoming the playground
of the developed world. As of Au-
gust 1, 2008, 2,090 people have stood
on the top of Everest. Both the South
Col route that took John Hunt's 1953
expedition six weeks to pioneer and
the North Col route on which George
Leigh Mallory and Andrew Irvine died
in 1924 have been climbed from base
camp to summit, solo and without oxy-
gen, in less than seventeen hours. The
mountain has also been climbed by a
blind man, a teenager, and a sixty-four-
year-old; it has been descended by ski-
ers and snowboarders, floated down by
paragliders, and flown over by balloon-
ists. The problem with Everest is no
longer how to get up it but how to dis-
pose of the junk—the hundreds of used
oxygen cylinders and tons of human
excrement and waste food—that litters
its flanks. In its official history of Everest,
George Band, who was the youngest
member of the 1953 expedition, calls it
"the world's highest garbage dump."

Before the Victorians reintroduced
them as a form of recreation, mountains
were of interest only to those unfor-
tunate enough to live in them. In the
Himalaya, they were holy places, a
perpetual reminder of the gods—the
Tibetan name for Everest is Cho-
molungma, "Goddess Mother of the
World"—and their summits were for-
bidden to mere mortals. In Europe,
superstitious Alpine peasants believed
mountain tops were the abodes of
witches, devils, and dragons. Lowland-
ers and people of sense chose to ignore
the peaks, dismissing them as mere
inconveniences—"considerable protu-
berances," Dr. Johnson called them—
and put there to make life difficult for
the civilized traveler.

According to Isserman and Weaver,
the general change in European atti-
itudes toward mountains began around
the middle of the eighteenth century
with the Gothic revival, the cult of the
picturesque, and Edmund Burke's

The grandest of the early Himalayan expeditions, and also the least eccentric: the camp of Luigi Amedeo, Duke of the Abruzzi, and his team below the west face of K2, 1909; photograph by Vittorio Sella, 'one of the greatest of all mountain photographers,' from Maurice Isserman and Stewart Weaver's Fallen Giants

For aesthetes, appreciating the beauty of the Alps was altogether differ-
ent from climbing them. When John Ruskin was invited to lecture to the
Alpine Club in 1865, seven years after its foundation, he used the occasion to
denounce its members as Philistines:

You have despised nature [and] all the deep and sacred sensations of natural scenery... The French revolutionists made stables of the cathedrals of France; you have made racecourses of the cathe-
drals of the earth... The Alps themselves, which your own poets used to love so fervently, you look upon as soaped poles in bear gar-
dens, which you set yourselves to climb and slide down again, with "shrieks of delight."

Isserman and Weaver, being finely
tuned to social distinctions and crush-
ing British snobbery, interpret Ruskin's
denunciation as a diatribe as a matter of
class warfare. "His remark dripped with class conde-
sension," they say. I wonder. Ruskin
had a talent for vituperation, but his venom on this occasion had nothing
to do with "class condescension" for the
simple reason that, socially, there
was no difference between him and his
audience. The members of the Alpine
Club were professional men—scientis-
tists, doctors, clergymen, lawyers, sol-
diers, even a few writers—gentlemen
who could afford to travel to the Alps
and stay there for as long they pleased,
just like Ruskin himself.

There were differences between
them, of course, but temperament
aside, they were differences of nurture,
not nature. Ruskin had been privately
educated at home by tutors, whereas
most of the founding members of the
Alpine Club had suffered the rigors of
a board school education de-
digned to train the right kind of
men to administer the British Empire. A
taste for strenuous exercise, adventure,
and deprivation had been beaten into
them along with Greek and Latin, and
mountaineering was a perfect way of
satisfying it. "The authentic English-
man," Leslie Stephen wrote cheerfully,"is one who wanders all
day among rocks and snow; and to
come as near breaking his neck as his
conscience will allow." For Ruskin,
art critic and lover of mountain land-
scapes, snobbery was not nature. Snob-
bery, of course, figured large
in "the intensely status-conscious
eyes of the Raj," far larger, in fact, than
the mountains themselves, especially
in the first half of the nineteenth century,
when no sensible person dreamed of
climbing them for pleasure. For Vic-
torian contemporaries, the Himalaya
was important as a natural frontier,
and mapping and measuring it was a
handy way of laying claim to the ter-
ritory. Hence the Great Trigonometri-
cal Survey, George Everest's 750-mile
"grid-iron" of triangulated calculations
of the heights and positions of all the
peaks. Like every other Himalayan
enterprise, building the survey was a
bone-wearying business, involv-
ing hardship, brute labor, cold, hunger,
and exhaustion, as well as technical
skill in using heavy equipment such as
sight poles, which they lugged to the
mountaintops, dismissing them as mere
superstitious Alpine peasants believed
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Before the Victorians reintroduced
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and lived up to his reputation as “the Beast 666,” joined an attempt on K2 record for women climbers that lasted varying degrees of eccentricity. At the subdivision of adventurers so rich that Raj, the Himalaya was the preserve of the gear, and a six-week trek into the Up camp, columns of porters to carry hired, people to cook and clean and set were guides and interpreters to be train journey to Darjeeling; then there voyage to Calcutta, an eighteen-hour major undertaking: a five-week sea early days, merely getting there was a whatever fantasy one possesses. In the as high as the highest Alps, but also a remarkably distant land with mountains twice enticingly strange: not only a romantically distant land with mountains twice as high as the highest Alps, but also a very rich that hardship itself was an adventure.

They came in many forms and with varying degrees of eccentricity. At the turn of the century, for example, Fanny Bullock Workman, a formidable New England heiress, climbed a number of challenging peaks with her elderly husband—they cited in “woolen skirts and hobnailed boots”—and set an altitude record for women climbers that lasted thirty years. Around the same time, the dottiest of all mountaineers, the infamously Aleister Crowley, aka “the Great Beast 666,” joined an attempt on K2 and lived up to his reputation as “the wickedest man in the world” by pulling a gun on a fellow climber. The grandest of the early Himalayan expeditions, and also the least eccentric, was that of Luigi Amadeo, Duke of the Abruzzi, in 1909. Amadeo was an explorer, sportsman, accomplished climber, and grandson of the king of Italy. He brought with him a team of four guides, three porters, a cartographer, and a doctor, all of them Italian. He also brought with him 13,000 pounds of stores and equipment: everything from clothing and climbing gear to food and medicine, cameras, photogrammetric survey supplies, meteorological instruments, and more, all in seemingly limitless profusion.

It was a vast load that required three hundred Ladakhi and Balti porters and sixty transport ponies to carry. More importantly, his team included Vittorio Sella, one of the greatest of all mountain photographers, who immortalized the expedition in a series of brilliant, atmospheric pictures. The duke’s purpose was to climb K2; the “Three years later, in 1905, Crowley led a disastrous expedition of his own to Kangchenjunga that resulted in four deaths. Crowley, who had heard their “frantic cries” when they fell, chose to stay in his tent: “A mountain ‘accident’ of this sort is one of the things for which I have no sympathy whatever,” he wrote. The next day he further reinforced his reputation for recklessness by climbing straight down past the scene of the accident without pausing to see if anyone had survived.

The Italian expedition was a model of style and efficiency but the duke had gone to the Himalaya in the same spirit as he had gone climbing in the Alps: for the Ruwenzori—for the fun of it, for adventure, and without ulterior political motives. Not so the British, for whom Everest was “a matter of national pride, a continuation of the Raj by other means. They had created an empire on which the sun never set, but their explorers had failed to reach the North Pole and had been beaten by the Norwegians in the race to the South Pole. That left Everest, “the Third Pole”: “Amundsen’s undisputed conquest of the South Pole,” say the authors, “and, even more, the poigniant defeat and death in retreat of Robert Scott…seized the public imagination.” Everest had a great deal in common with the two poles: it was lethally cold and in its thin air every upward step required a physical effort no less relentless and exhausting than manhandling a heavy sledge across the polar ice. That made it an ideal testing ground for virtues the British valued most: fortitude, perseverance, and the kind of docile courage with which early explorers uncomplainingly suffered un-speakable hardships.

All those qualities were tested to the breaking point during World War I, then tested again at high altitude in the Himalaya. Everest offered “a few lucky survivors one more chance to die gracefully for their country,” and they did so in the same dogged way in which they had fought the war:

[Their plan in 1922] called for advance by stages, laying and stocking through repeated marches a series of six ascending camps or depots roughly five miles apart on the glacier and 2,000 vertical feet apart on the mountain…. The true inspiration for this cambersome business seems to have been the British Army’s incremental experience of the western front. “In this Polar method of advance,” wrote John Noel [the expedition photographer], “there is an essential psychological principle to be maintained. Each advance, each depot built, must be considered as ground won from the mountain. It must be consolidated and held, and no man must ever abandon an inch of ground won, or turn his back to the mountain once he has started the attack. A retreat has a disastrous moral effect….” One could hardly ask for a clearer articulation of the Great indubitable sovereign of the region,” according to the expedition’s chronicler, “gigantic and solitary…jealously defended by a vast throng of vassal peaks, precipitated from invisible miles and miles of glacier.” K2 is now reckoned to be the most difficult of all the eight-thousand-meter peaks, and by far the most mindless obsession; to date, only 305 climbers have reached its summit and at least seventy-six have died trying. The duke’s attempt failed, but in other ways it was a triumph: his scientists gathered their data as planned, and Amadeo himself proved that survival at great altitude was possible by climbing higher and staying up there longer than anyone before him. He also left the Abruzzi name on a major ridge, thereby establishing Italy’s claim to K2, which was duly honored, though not until 1954.

War mentality: in laying siege to Everest in this way, the 1922 expedition established a military model for Himalayan mountaineering that lasted half a century, and despite its patent failure in 1922. Ismert and Weaver have no time for mindless obsession, or stiff upper lips, nor for the cult of heroic failure and “the high rhetoric of empire and war [that] took over” in 1924, when the deaths of George Leigh Mallory and Andrew Irvine were made public and the two young climbers became “the glorious dead” and Everest “the finest cenotaph in the world.” By the time he died, Mallory was on his third attempt at the mountain and knew how much hardship was involved. He was also in love with the place. For a climber accustomed to the Alps, the sheer scale of the great Himalayan peaks was irresistible: Everest is not just higher than Mont Blanc, it is almost double the height—higher by two and a half miles from summit to snowline (one from Base Camp to summit, with approach marches reckoned in weeks, not hours, and routes measured in miles instead of feet). For a climber like Mallory, who had the stamina of a marathon runner, it was heaven. It was also beautiful and for Mallory, as for his Bloomsbury friends, beauty mattered.

We caught the gleam of snow behind the grey mists. A whole group of mountains began to appear in gigantic fragments. Mountain shapes are often fantastic seen through a mist; these were like the wildest creation of a dream. A preposterous trigonality with a lump of the depths; its edge came leaping up at an angle of about 70° and ended nowhere. To the left a black serrated crest was hanging in the sky incredibly. Gradually, very gradually, we saw the great mountain sides and glaciers and aretes, now one fragment and now another through the floating rifts, until far higher in the sky than imagination had dared to suggest, the white summit of Everest appeared. And in this series of partial glimpses we had seen a whole: we were able to piece together the fragments, to interpret the dream.

Were Everest *1,000 feet lower it would have been climbed in 1924. Were it 1,000 feet higher it would have been an engineering problem,” said Peter Lloyd, a member of another unsuccessful Everest expedition, in 1938. At 29,000 feet, Everest is already nudging the jet stream; if winter comes early the jet stream drops a centimeter for every 1,000 feet to 26,000, the temperature drops with it, and the wind blows so fiercely that it is hard to move at all, let alone to climb. ‘The debilitating effect of high altitude that reduces the strongest to slow motion and makes even easy rock problems seem extreme. The ability to climb technically difficult rock at great altitude is a rare gift even among experienced Himalayans for whom the simple business of moving upward, one exhausted step after another, is already a great test of courage, obstinacy, and true grit. All the early expeditions had those qualities in abundance but the British wanted to climb Everest in the same
style that they climbed in the Alps: casually and sportingly, in the spirit of adventure, and strictly as amateurs, with inadequate clothing—tweed and wool turned out to be the preferred equipment; Mallory used oxygen but would have preferred not to because he thought it was cheating. Like other members of the Alpine Club, he also disdained newfangled Continental gear like pitons and carabiners, "those conjoined miracles of simple technology," Isserman and Weaver call them, "that made possible the placing of points of belay on an otherwise sheer face." With equipment like that, steeper, more daring routes were possible, but it wasn't trench warfare and it wasn't sporting; so they left the newfangled to Continental climbers.

The Germans had already climbed outrageously hard north faces in the Alps and now, in the wake of military defeat and the vengeful Versailles Treaty, they wanted to restore their national pride by climbing a major Himalayan. Theodore von Stephan's team was led by Paul Bauer, one of Hitler's early converts, the mountain he chose was Kangchenjunga, and the route was brutal—harder and steeper than anything that had been attempted before. His team performed wonders, tunneling under ice towers they couldn't climb, digging ice caves when they couldn't pitch tents, and they seemed poised for the summit until the always unpredictable Himalayan weather suddenly changed:

A violent blizzard struck the ridge, pinned them down for three days, and finally forced them into a memorable death-defying retreat...but not before. [Bauer] had infinitely raised the technical standard of Himalayan mountaineering and restored to his own satisfaction the tarnished honor of his countrymen.

Bauer's example encouraged other climbers who had no taste for over-equipped, military-style expeditions. Foremost among them were Bill Tilman and Eric Shipton, two free spirits who traveled light, climbed for pleasure rather than national glory, and were the first British climbers to treat their Himalayan enterprise as a profession. What Tillman called "the spirit of the hills" and the French called "l'air du coude"—that is, two climbers roped together, each relying on the other, sometimes in dicey situations. It's also expected to be fun, though no one ever went up in the Himalaya with that in mind. The mountains are too big, too high, too remote. Unlike the Alps, they have no strategically placed refuges, no cable cars to shorten the uphill slog, and no comforts at all to alleviate the squalor, drudgery, and sheer exhaustion of life at high altitude and in intense cold in a place where there is only rock and snow and ice, and nothing ever grows. In such harsh environments minor tics become intolerable intrusions, and even the best of friends may end up enemies.

Mountaineering has traditionally been a pastime for misfits. Yet paradoxically, one of the pleasures of climbing is companionship, old-timers used to call "the spirit of the hills" and the French called "l'air du coude"—that is, two climbers roped together, each relying on the other, sometimes in dicey situations. It's also expected to be fun, though no one ever went up in the Himalaya with that in mind. The mountains are too big, too high, too remote. Unlike the Alps, they have no strategically placed refuges, no cable cars to shorten the uphill slog, and no comforts at all to alleviate the squalor, drudgery, and sheer exhaustion of life at high altitude and in intense cold in a place where there is only rock and snow and ice, and nothing ever grows. In such harsh environments minor tics become intolerable intrusions, and even the best of friends may end up enemies.

Once upon a time, the psychopathology of expedition life was a problem climbers kept to themselves. But manners change and these days, when travel is cheap and climbers go to the Himalaya with as little fanfare as they go to the Alps or the Rockies, bad blood and outrageous behavior are the new fashion. They make good copy and help sell what Isserman and Weaver call "climb and tell" books in which "bruised feelings and simmering resentments were beginning to replace frostbite and hypoxia as the signature ailments of high-altitude mountaineering." Here is an example of the new style spirit of the hills during the disastrous 1996 season on Everest in which eight people died:

Three Indian climbers were trapped high on the Northeast Ridge on May 10, and early the next morning a Japanese party intent on the summit walked past them, though they were still alive. By the time the Japanese descended, one of the climbers was dead, another missing, and a third barely alive and tangled in his rope. They removed the rope from the survivor but made no effort to help him down the mountain. He too would die. "Above eight thousand meters," one of the Japanese climbers offered by way of self-justification, "is not a place where people can afford morality."

Aleister Crowley would doubtless have been proud of them and Jerry Springer might have used them on his show, but their antics make a depressing end to a fine book by two mountain lovers with a strong sense of right and wrong.