



## AAC Publications

---

### **The Summits of Modern Man: Mountaineering after the Enlightenment.**

By Peter H. Hansen

The Summits of Modern Man: Mountaineering after the Enlightenment. Peter H. Hansen. Harvard University Press, 2013. 392 pages, 24 halftones. Hardcover, \$35.

Climbing has recently attracted increasing attention from major university presses. This is Harvard's second (after Taylor's *Pilgrims of the Vertical*), and Yale published Isserman and Weaver's *Fallen Giants*. Peter Hansen's book is the most academic and wide-ranging. "Mountain climbing did not emerge as the expression of a preexisting condition known as 'modernity,' but rather was one of the practices that constructed and redefined modernities during debates over who was first." This sentence gives the tone of this ambitious, fascinating but often difficult book. Although its concentration is on the Alps, do not expect an engaging narrative such as Fergus Fleming's *Killing Dragons*. We do find lucid accounts of the first ascents of Mont Blanc, the Matterhorn, and Everest; Hansen, who has climbed the Matterhorn himself, writes with a mountaineer's authority. But he is less interested in the climbs themselves than in what they meant and what inspired them.

This is a work of cultural history. Its vocabulary is often that of contemporary theory. Thus references to Walter Benjamin, Foucault, and "the Baudelairean aesthetic of modernity." Hansen is never pompous, but he is not always easy. His main argument is that mountaineering and the Enlightenment emerged together. Climbing was part of a broad movement toward individualization and secularization. As Alpine dragons were dispelled, "conquest" became a popular word in Alpinism. We may speak of "the brotherhood of the rope," but Hansen documents how much "who got to the top" has mattered. He provides abundant background to the issue of Mont Blanc (Balmat or Paccard?) and Everest (Tenzing or Hillary? Mallory and Irvine? An endless obsession.)

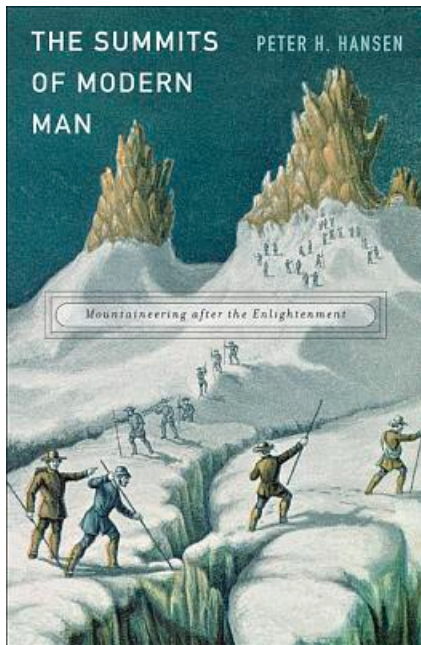
The question of summit precedence leads Hansen to speak of "a multiplicity of modernities." Like romanticism, modernity is no single thing. It stimulates individualism, but nationalism is still much with us. I wonder what Hansen would make of the 1971 Everest international expedition. Intended to promote harmony, it did the opposite. Both nationalism and individualism triumphed, but the expedition did not. At least there was no argument about who reach the top first: nobody did.

This book is enriched by halftones showing how the mountains were once viewed. Page 6 shows a very comical dragon; page 24 displays a fanciful view of *le Mont Inaccessible*, an inverted pyramid that never existed. The dust jacket itself is an 1855 engraving by George Baxter. The mountains look like giant avocados. As with the American West, the Alps looked strange and overwhelming to many early visitors.

Hansen has done prodigious research over a long period, some in foreign languages including Chinese (with some assistance). The result is rich and challenging. He may have too much material for a single volume. Anyone interested in the origins and cultural significance of mountaineering should read this one. Maybe twice.

Steven Jervis

## Images



## Article Details

Author	Steven Jervis
Publication	AAJ
Volume	56
Issue	88
Page	377
Copyright Date	2014
Article Type	Book reviews