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Extreme Eiger: The Race to Climb the Direct Route Up the North Face of the Eiger

By Peter and Leni Gillman

Extreme Eiger: The Race to Climb the Direct Route Up the North Face of the Eiger. Peter and Leni Gillman. Simon & Schuster (U.K.), 2015. 394 pages. Paperback, \$21.95.

Arguably, the U.K.'s most significant climbing never occurred on British soil. The southwest and east faces of Everest come to mind, as does the south face of Annapurna and many others. But the single most significant "U.K." ascent, in terms of everything that goes into a good story about climbing—the personalities, the equipment, the public misconceptions, the media circus—might just be the 1966 Eiger Direct route. Peter Gillman covered the climb for his newspaper, the *Daily Telegraph*. Chris Bonington took the photographs, and Gillman and Dougal Haston produced a book on the climb, *Eiger Direct*. Now, Gillman, with help from his wife, Leni, has produced a more complete version of the story, *Extreme Eiger*.

The Gillmans' goal was to marry the separately crafted stories of the British-American team and the Germans—that is, to tell the entire story. The result is a fascinating investigation into what we know about the 1966 climb and what we thought we knew, plus a whole bunch of stuff we never would have guessed. Gillman brings decades of his own reflection about the ascent to this version of the story, explaining everything from the backgrounds of both teams' members to their spaghetti-like relationships on the mountain to their post-climb lives, deaths, and legacies.

This is not reporting in the "he-said, she-said" style. Rather, *Extreme Eiger* is proper narrative, a result of Gillman putting in the hours on the ground and deploying the care and consideration that accurate storytelling requires. In Switzerland, Gillman actually became part of the British-American team, simply because no one else was available as a base manager. For the new book, he interviewed all five German survivors of the climb, assisted by the writer and researcher Jochen Hemmleb.

Extreme Eiger is filled with anecdotes that cast the shadow of humanity across the story. It's almost as if the entire cast knew the play was going to be a monumental tragedy, but still they beavered on together. It is also an exploration of how stories change over time. "Our story also became an inquiry into the nature of human memory and how it influences narratives. Some of the stories we unearthed contradict the earlier published accounts—and sometimes each other," the couple writes. "We have presented these for the insights they offer into the nature of human experience as mediated by memory."

Any reader with the slightest interest in the Eiger, European climbing, the "stars" involved, British-American and German relationships, and the nature of mountain journalism will find *Extreme Eiger* the kind of story you can't put down. Bravo to Peter and Leni.

– Cameron M. Burns

Images



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