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EVEREST, INC.: THE RENEGADES AND ROGUES WHO BUILT AN INDUSTRY AT THE TOP OF THE WORLD

By Will Cockrell

Everest, Inc.: The Renegades and Rogues who Built an Industry at the Top of the World By Will Cockrell (Gallery Books)

Will Cockrell wanted to know how, after a mere 394 climbers reached the summit of Chomolungma in the 39 years leading up to 1992, that number exploded to roughly 11,500 people over the next 32 years. Or, as he puts it: “How did a peak that was at first unclimbable, then downgraded to simply suicidal, become one that thousands of people could scale?” In telling the story, he touches on the dividing line that makes people either infatuated with summiting this mountain or disgusted by what the critics call “the circus.”

Everest, Inc. is in the category of climbing books that are not about an individual attempt or climb but more a profile of a region or mountain, such as Heinrich Harrer’s history of the north face of the Eiger in *The White Spider*. On Chomolungma, the very nature of the audacious goal of guiding climbers unskilled in high-altitude mountaineering safely to the top and back has turned the mountain into a business setting, and Cockrell’s focus is on these guiding ventures and their competition. The companies are the personalities here, at least as much as the climbers themselves.

Cockrell provides refreshing insight into the approach and values of the guides on Chomolungma. He advocates for them, giving numerous examples that reaching the top is not their primary goal; rather, they find an intrinsic reward from helping others reach what might have otherwise been unattainable. There is a greater degree of “hand holding” in an attempt on this mountain, and Cockrell contrasts this with the traditional guides of rigid European and Canadian schools, and the less structured American tradition (though both focus on teaching increasingly complex skills and emphasize gaining experience). On Chomolungma, the nature of high-altitude climbing, supplemental oxygen use, and acclimatization rotations put the mountain and its 8,000-meter peers in a unique category. It is difficult to fairly compare the approaches to guiding, Cockrell notes, when lower mountain experience is less applicable.

Chomolungma today elicits two extreme viewpoints: It’s either the site of one of the world’s greatest adventures, where one can stare down death, or it is a crowded and commercial amusement park that is the antithesis of adventure. It comes down to values and which approach you value more. Cockrell’s respect for the commercial guiding companies and their guides is not expressed in a vacuum, even addressing the views from critics like Jon Krakauer.

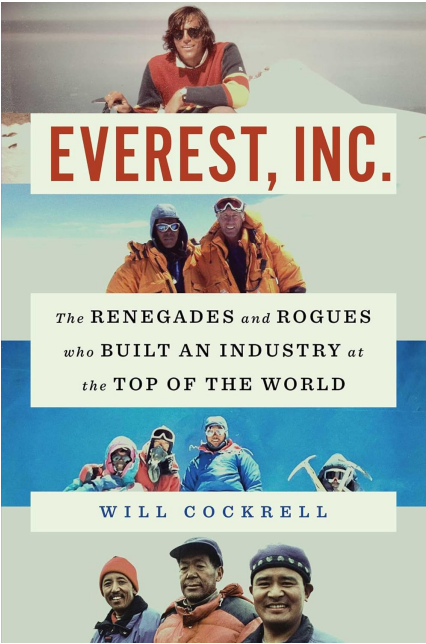
Everest, Inc. doesn’t break a lot of new ground—the stories of the dawn of Everest guiding and the creation of the companies that followed have been told in other books and articles—but Cockrell effectively consolidates the information. He also has applied his journalism skills and accumulated knowledge of commercial guiding from his work at *Men’s Journal* to the story; he interviewed contemporary guides, business owners, and new Nepali entrants to the “industry” to bring different perspectives.

This book says “company” too many times for a reader like me who is looking for stories of people in wild places and on adventurous climbs. I will put it on a different shelf than my climbing books,

perhaps next to *Endurance* by Alfred Lansing, which is used as a text in some business schools—just as Everest, Inc. might be one day, too.

—Andrew Szalay

Images



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