

## ***The Boardman Tasker Prize 2012***

### ***Adjudication by Bernard Newman***

An appreciation by Bernard Newman (Chairman) with contributions from fellow judges Shannon O'Donoghue and Lindsay Griffin.

Firstly I'd like to thank the Boardman Tasker Award Committee for giving me the opportunity to serve on the panel of judges for the last two years. To have access to so much high quality mountain literature has been a privilege and an honour, but most of all it's been a delight. For a climbing lit-geek like me it's tantamount to being let loose in a sweet/gear/photography shop. It's also been great fun and that's down to my fellow judges: Barry Imeson (last year), Shannon O'Donoghue and Lindsay Griffin. I salute you for your deep knowledge of the subject which provided a sound basis for the judging and your immunity to my constant stream of bad jokes and flippancy. I would also like to thank the Secretary of the BT Award, the admirable Steve Dean, who has dealt effortlessly and efficiently with the provision of the submitted books and our logistical requests.

I would like to congratulate the Boardman Tasker Award team on their Thirtieth Anniversary. The Award has become a foundation of modern climbing heritage, promoting that most important aspect of our sport – after fellowship and a love of the hills – our literature. Pete and Joe were world-class mountaineers, superb writers and great blokes – and you've done them proud over the years.

Judging such an array of brilliant books is a desperately difficult process, mainly on an emotional level. Writing a book not only requires a vast amount of time and effort, but also the exposure of intellect, personality, soul and to be frank, ego to public scrutiny. So for me all the authors of all the books we've read over the last two years, are brave people doing a brave thing and I have the utmost respect for them and their efforts. To quote fellow judge Shannon: *"They're all winners"*.

Before I start on the shortlist we'd like to give special mention to books that didn't quite make it on. Lindsay Griffin speaks for all of us when he writes: *"A follow-up to Richard Sale's 2000 reference work on the 8,000m peaks (with John Cleare), 'On Top of the World - The New Millennium' briefly summarises 20th Century mountaineering history before concentrating on new routes and special events over the last 12 years on the world's highest mountains. This large format book is beautifully produced with a fine collection of photos, some of which may not have appeared elsewhere in print. The main body of text provides a valuable historical reference for scholars of the 8,000ers, though they will need to own both volumes."*

Lindsay again: *"Linda Cracknell's 'Following our Fathers' is a superb little book, wonderfully written and conveying vivid images. Short story author and creative writing tutor Cracknell describes two commemorative expeditions: the first a walk following the footsteps of the father of a Norwegian friend, as he flees from German forces to neutral Sweden in WWII; the second an attempt at an alpine climb after sketchy research revealed a possible ascent by her own, long-deceased father. Through these the participants create 'their own pathways of personal meaning'. The draft of a full-length book, from which these two stories are taken, has already won an award, and we encourage the author to enter it for the Boardman-Tasker, when eventually published"*.

So let's get down to the shortlisted books. I'll run through them in author alphabetical order. First, Jim Curran's autobiography '*Here, There and Everywhere. . .*'

Jim's contribution to the climbing world is legendary. His writing, photography, films and more latterly, art have become part of the fabric of our world and even a brief round-up of his achievements would require the rest of the afternoon and evening at least. Jim is one of our greatest storytellers and as you read this book his mellifluous, ironic, laid-back southern drawl fills your head as he leads you through the days of his life from early childhood. Jim really does have a way with words: his narrative is by turns heartbreaking, moving, deeply frustrating but always there is that thread of great wit and relentless humour. Few books have had me laughing out loud over the years – Milligan's *Puckoon* instantly springs to mind as do the *Wilt* stories, and Jim's is up there with them.

This is not just a book about Jim's climbing life: his adventures making films and writing books are interwoven with his career in higher education as a teacher of art, mainly at Bristol Poly as was. For me, as is often the case with climbing books, the chronicle of this other life is the most captivating. But emotionally hard work too, for Jim pulls no punches with his frank description of personal relationships and life choices. For fans and followers of Jim's work it's all there – the detailed background to his many iconic films, vivid descriptions of climbing trips to the Greater Ranges and moving portraits of the people that have most influenced his life.

Now as we all know climbing has a huge literature, perhaps the biggest of any so-called sport and spanning nearly two centuries, but accounts of the attempts and subsequent ascents of Everest must comprise the lion's share. Our next book is a major addition to this genre.

'*Into The Silence*' by Wade Davis, is a big book – physically and metaphorically. It's scope is ambitious: the history of exploration of and attempts to climb Everest from the earliest days to the disappearance of Mallory and Irvine in 1924, plus detailed portraits of the main protagonists. I felt Wade's handling of this huge project almost constituted two books: the early Everest chronicle – familiar to many and well summarised by Wade; preceded by a fresh and predictably harrowing perspective on the experiences of a group of gifted mountaineers and explorers in the First World War. Fellow judge Shannon O'Donoghue observes: "*Wade's skilful weaving of the war stories with the Everest material was nothing short of masterful.*" Wade does not hold back with his descriptions of life and death in the trenches and these sections are not for the squeamish. However, these tales provide a valuable new insight into the characters of a remarkable group of individuals. You come away from the book convinced that sticking your neck out on Everest, with absolutely no back up, was a walk in the park after what they'd been through.

Now, it seems to have become fashionable over recent years for politically correct revisionists to dismiss the efforts of this generation of climbers as embodying the worst excesses of imperialism. Having read much on the subject over the years, it's plain to me that such ideas are at best ill-informed at worst disingenuous and self-serving. These were passionate men confronted by turns with unimaginable horror and indescribable beauty. They experienced the worst that humanity could serve up and the best, and this latter was reflected in the way they interacted with the people and cultures they met on their travels in the Himalaya. Such travels were catharsis on the grand scale and their subsequent writings convey a simple overriding love and respect for the people and the landscape. Wade Davis is to be congratulated on his magnum opus, and for readers new to the Everest genre and old hands alike, this is a must-have book.

Over the last few years Andy Kirkpatrick has established himself as a major player in the climbing world, not just on rock and ice but in the fields of writing, lecturing, motivational speaking and telling dodgy jokes in public. It seems the climbing world never fails to provide a fresh generation of gifted storytellers and humorists: just when you think the scene is getting bland, commercialised or just in a rut, up pops a new character to inject those essentials of wit, irreverence and individuality into the body climbing. Andy on the other hand. . . just kidding. No, Mr Kirkpatrick has managed to combine a necky climbing career with a God-given ability to tell us all about it. His lecturing style and banter at the bar may not be for those of a delicate disposition but you always come away from the encounter refreshed. So it was with some glee that I approached this latest instalment in his autobiography. I must confess to not having read part one '*Psychovertical*', mainly because I couldn't blag a free copy off him. But I understand it was quite well received. Ignorance was an advantage for once, as in this case as it allowed me an objective view of this book. '*Cold Wars – Climbing the fine line between risk and reality*' is a compelling read. It describes a difficult period in Andy's life: difficult climbs, difficult relationships, difficult circumstances, often with brutal frankness and totally without the navel-gazing and cringe-making soul-searching that can trap less pragmatic authors.

Andy's effortless narrative takes the reader into parallel worlds of parenthood and extreme climbing with the reader emerging unsure which is the scariest or more demanding. He is acutely observant of people: his peerless portrayal of the leading characters only matched by his depiction of alpinism at the highest level. There are lighter moments of course, this is Andy Kirkpatrick after all, and his mastery of irony and self deprecation shines through with satisfying regularity.

'*The Challenge of K2*' by Richard Sale. To most people, myself included, the high Himalayan peaks, particularly the 8000ers, represent an environment as alien and unattainable as the surface of the moon. So armchair mountaineers such as myself have always relied on the writings of Himalayanists, children of a greater God, to give us at least a taste of what it's like to climb the highest peaks. Inevitably such accounts are subjective so it's essential that now and again someone undertakes an objective, detailed review of a peak's history. Whilst events on Everest seem to monopolise the imagination of the media, it's perhaps K2 of all the 8000ers that most often disturbs the thoughts of mountaineers. K2 is a dangerous mountain: it's big, technically difficult and has the worst weather. Such a mountaineers' mountain requires special treatment in a book and Richard Sale has done a magnificent job in detailing the history of K2 from the early days of exploration right up to the present day.

By the very nature of climbing on this peak many of the chapters relate to epic disasters: the story of Art Gilkey and the incredible attempt to rescue him from high on the mountain in 1953 resonate with the more recent and equally heartbreaking account of Ger McDonnell, Tshering Dorje, Pemba Gyalje and their friends' heroic efforts in 2008. The account of the first ascent and the role and subsequent appalling treatment of Walter Bonatti were for me an eye-opener, revealing a side to big expeditions of which I was perhaps naively ignorant. But Sale has done a great job, and I leave the last word to Lindsay who should know: "*Richard's research of past written history is exhaustive. No stone has been left unturned, making this, to date, the most comprehensive reference source in the English language for the world's second highest mountain*".

Next up is '*Fiva – An Adventure That Went Wrong*' by Gordon Stainforth. *Fiva* describes a true climbing epic played out on a colossal rock wall in Norway by two very young and inexperienced climbers over three days in the summer of 1969. The audacity of their

plan is breathtaking but typical of youth, viz: we've done a bit of rock climbing in Wales, and been up a couple of peaks in the Alps with a guide, so what shall we have a go at as our first proper mountain route? I know, let's do the 5,000ft *Fiva Route* on the Store Trolltind in Norway, we don't have a detailed description, but it's only VS so where's the problem?

Gordon's confidence has not diminished with age: he decided to set the book in the first person present tense, which throws up several challenges not immediately obvious. Most significantly it compels the author to speak and think as a 19-year-old on the spot, which colours all attitudes to his situation and decision making. You can't allow 20-20 hindsight or subsequently attained wisdom to direct the narrative. This makes for an extremely technically difficult piece of writing, but if anyone can pull it off Gordon can (given his writing, photography and cinematic credentials) and he does so to spectacular effect.

The story of the climb and subsequent escape is at times frustrating, baffling and exhausting but it remains totally engaging. John and Gordon are identical twins: 'alike, yet not alike' and although Gordon can pre-empt many of John's reactions to their perilous situation as only a twin could, it is still a very personal struggle for survival. I must declare that this is not the first time I've heard this story. I was lucky enough to get it first-hand from John shortly after the event when he came to Leeds University in the autumn of 1969. What I couldn't know at the time was how raw the experience must have been in his mind and given what I've read in this book he must still have been in shock!

And so to the sixth and final book on our list which is introduced by Lindsay:

*" 'The Wild Within' by Simon Yates is more than a standard mountaineering memoir. Yates is an insightful writer. There is much discussion on the conflicting nature of the pursuit of mountaineering expeditions, both commercial and private, with the raising of a young family. But the reader comes away with the overall impression that Simon has this distinctly better balanced than most.*

*He dwells on the evolution of once remote areas due to the introduction of mobile, satellite, and laptop communication. And there are plenty of stories of his own communication with the general public and mountaineering world as a roving lecturer."* Unquote.

It's an oft-aided cliché that the world is getting smaller and that the last wildernesses have gone and there's nowhere left to explore. There's nothing new under the sun – it's been said that James Fenimore Cooper was mourning the demise of the American wilderness in his Hawkeye novels back in the 1820s. However, whilst there is a growing sense of a dwindling wilderness and thus diminishing scope for the wilderness experience amongst adventurers and lovers of the open spaces, adventure and the thrill of the first seen landscape is still to be had by those with the know-how, drive and vision.

Simon Yates, writer, traveller and mountaineer is one such visionary. *'The Wild Within'* ranges across the continents from Worthing to the Yukon, Chamonix to Greenland, but perhaps it's the still largely unspoilt vastnesses of Tierra del Fuego that hold his and the reader's attention most. His accounts of wild sailing and new climbs at the very tip of South America with the remarkable Celia Bull and Andy Parkin prove that there's still peace and unspoilt beauty out there.

So that's our shortlist, as I said it hasn't been easy but it has been a pleasure. However, an overall winner is required and in our choice we were unanimous – a book which celebrates all that is best in mountaineering literature and the Boardman Tasker Award in particular;

That book is *'Cold Wars – Climbing the fine line between risk and reality'* by Andy Kirkpatrick.