

**BT Prize Winner announcement speech from Robin Campbell,  
Chair of Boardman Tasker Prize Judges 2015. 20/11/2015**

Good afternoon all. I'm Robin Campbell, and I'm here to present the Judges' report and decision. To clear it out of the way – I have never written a book, and I'm a poor sort of climber, disabled now by age, and earlier by what David Pagel wittily calls Cold Feet. And – to advertise my own prejudices – my choice of the best contributions to mountain literature since the birth of the Boardman Tasker Prize in 1983 would be David Craig's *Native Stones*, Anne Sauvy's *Flammes de Pierre*, and Harold Drasdo's *Ordinary Route* – and none of these won the Prize.

As the great Rex Stout wrote, putting the words in the mouth of his fat detective Nero Wolfe, "Nothing corrupts a man so deeply as writing a book: the myriad temptations are overwhelming". Very true, and the problem for the writer, or speaker for that matter, is that he must on no account be dull, and so we give in to temptation and write or say things that we absolutely shouldn't. Be prepared.

I would like to begin by reviewing this year's submissions. We had a total of 36 books submitted, a handful short of last year's 41. The most common categories were autobiography or biography (10) and first or second-hand accounts of particular climbs or mountains (9). We had 5 each of fiction and what might be described as travel books, and 2 books of poems. Some books were *sui generis*: Dave MacLeod's textbook about sport-climbing injuries – a gruesome affair, and Simon Ingram's book of mountain portraits *Between the Sunset and the Sea*. I liked this very much, particularly the history of Maskelyne's experiments on Schiehallion. It recalled Eileen Molony's *Portraits of Mountains* to me, although that was a multi-authored work.

We had worthy books from four previous BT prizewinners: Ed Douglas's biography of Ben Moon *Statement*, Peter and Leni Gillman's history of the 1966 Eiger Direct Route *Extreme Eiger*, Jeff Long's short story collection *Too Close to God*, and Bernadette McDonald's history of post-war Slovenian climbing *Alpine Warriors*. Regarding the latter book, and her prize-winning *Freedom Climbers*, the temptation is overwhelming for me to say that I find it an odd thing for a Canadian to write histories of Polish and Slovenian climbing. How would the Canadian climbers like it

if some Polish or Slovenian writer wrote their history for them? Not much, I fancy. We need to hear from Voytek Kurtyka, of course, but if ever he writes a book, he won't submit it, because of his well-known 'dog in the manger' attitude to Prizes and Awards. Then, amongst the other books not selected for short-listing, I must mention the valuable autobiography and biography of Steve McClure and Eric Jones, Guy Robertson and Adrian Crofton's gorgeous photo-book *Great Mountain Crags of Scotland*, and Christopher Norton's book presenting Edward Norton's Everest diaries and drawings *Everest Revealed*. 'Everest Revealed' was in many respects the pick of this year's offerings, but unfortunately Edward Norton is long departed and cannot receive a Prize. Lastly, on behalf of the Boardman Tasker Charitable Trust, I thank all those authors and publishers who submitted books for this year's Prize.

At this point I must also thank my fellow judges Graham Desroy and Terry Gifford for their amiable co-operation. We have all three of us given many weeks of effort in trying to get our heads around these 36 books, without – I am overwhelmingly tempted to add – a penny of fee or expenses. I would also like to thank Steve and Janet Dean for guidance throughout the year, and Audrey Salkeld who last year introduced me to the traditions and mechanics of the judging process.

I turn now to the five short-listed books, and will deal with these, like Stephen Venables before me, in alphabetical order.

Sandy Allan's *In Some Lost Place*, the gripping and engrossing account of an 18-day traverse of Nanga Parbat, is beautifully produced and very well illustrated – an excellent job by his editor Ed Douglas and Vertebrate Publishing. Also, of the four short-listed non-fiction books, it is the only one provided with an Index, and that got a huge tick from me. It's a story of two halves: the first half, the traverse of the Mazeno Ridge is an impressive display of perfect competence and professionalism; the second half – after the party splits above the Gap, and the two Allans head for the summit – is something entirely different. There they are with a packet of digestive biscuits and a more-or-less empty stove lighter, heading for the summit, far out on a reckless and perilous limb, about to be sustained by bivouacs in snow caves or in nothing, and hoping for assistance on the way down the Kinshofer route. Only luck – or if like Rick and Sandy you are a believer, the Hand of God – and a timely encounter with two Czech climbers preserves them from disaster. It's hard to know why battle-hardened veterans like Rick and Sandy would press on under these

circumstances, and we don't really find out why. There seems to have been little discussion between them, but something impelled them upwards into crisis. They are both religious men, and they may have felt that the Force was with them, perhaps. I enjoyed Sandy's book enormously, and I'm sure that it will be on every climber's bookshelf for decades to come – a Himalayan classic, like the climb itself.

Next comes Daniel Arnold's *Snowblind: Stories of Alpine Obsession*. These are more or less gruesome tales of individuals obsessed by particular climbs or with a way of life – like Lisa, the guide protagonist of 'Down From the Cold', who prefers her solitary life in an unheated vehicle to the comfortable married life of her former climbing partner. The Gothic solitary and solo heroine Ann of 'Dead Till Proven Otherwise' – who has these words tattooed beneath her collarbones – 'feels vicious. The knife cutting open the future. She doesn't know what she'll find there, but it's bound to be different from the past if she can just make herself sharp enough'. The most gruesome story 'The Skin of the World' has two zealots climbing a huge Himalayan Mountain. Ian carries a shrunken severed head as a trophy, ju-ju or charm. David throws it down the mountain. Near the summit they find a half-dead climber, perhaps a Russian, in the snow. Ian determines to rescue him, but in the course of a nightmare descent David drops the Russian to his death, severing his head in the process.

These are not 'Tales of Adventure' – as Daniel suggested in his video presentation – but Tales of Misadventure. In these stories, deaths, near-death experiences and ghastly bivouacs are never far away. Collections of this sort are like a rich cake: two slices at a sitting are OK, but then you need a bit of a rest! The quality of Daniel's writing is very high, and he plainly was able to draw on a treasure-house of miserable experiences when constructing the stories. It's as good a collection of short mountain fiction as we've seen for a while.

Now, not making a great deal of progress through the alphabet, we come to Barry Blanchard and *The Calling: A Life Rocked by Mountains*, recounting his life of hard times in high places from his native Canada to the Himalaya. My initial notes about this say "Printed in boldface sans-serif – that's a complete no-no for me. Unreadable". Then there was the constant swearing, and pointless references to punk rock. But my colleagues persuaded me to persevere, and the more I read, the more I grew to like it. There is an admirable honesty and precision in his accounts; despite all the

nicknames, the people are all accurately identified, photographs carefully chosen and captioned, dates and other details are all recoverable. It's a proper history. Barry writes with tremendous intensity and pace, communicating his startling experiences well without sacrificing details of topography, timing and so forth; you come to know his companions well too, for they are drawn from a fairly close circle of fast friends, and these qualities combine to involve the reader in his story in an intimate way. I found it in the end to be a beguiling read, almost a page-turner, as they say. I am unable to report whether the recommended playlist of punk rock might have improved the experience. But I am sure that lightface serif would have!

Now, David Pagel's *Cold Feet: Stories of a Middling Climber*. If David is a 'middling climber', then I am pond-life. This is a collection of high-quality previously-published articles arranged by theme: Classic Peaks, Legendary Mountaineers, Epics, Home Turf, Mountain Profiles, Perspective and concluding with an outburst of Verses, intended to be sung. It is a sort of homage to and emulation of Tom Patey's *One Man's Mountains*. I think David would concede that he doesn't quite have Patey's turn of wit, but there is plenty of wit here, and I often found myself laughing, sometimes even guffawing. My main criticism of David's book is that it is hard to find your way about in it: the article titles often give little away, and once again there is no Index. For example 'The Big Nasty' could apply to almost any mountain, and 'Hanging By a Thread' to almost every climb. And you learn rather too often how long you have to drive for a weekend's climbing from Minnesota. After all, London-based climbers like Mick Fowler put up with this without undue complaint! But there is much to enjoy in David's collection: I particularly enjoyed his encounters with the Eiger, and with its architect the great Anderl Heckmair, and I was greatly amused by some of his verses, especially 'Because It Isn't There' which bemoans the fact that he can't get his collection properly published – because Everest isn't in it!

Lastly, we come to John Porter's *One Day as a Tiger: Alex MacIntyre and the Birth of Light and Fast Alpinism*. This is a compelling mixture of autobiography, biography and history, telling John Porter's own story as well as Alex MacIntyre's, and describing the fever of alpine-style Himalayan climbing that spread from Poland and other East European countries to Yorkshire. As with David Pagel's book I make the complaint that it's hard to find your way around *One Day as a Tiger*. The chapter titles are no help, the book jumps about in time and space, and there is no Index, but

Vertebrate Publishing is again to be congratulated on a very well-produced book.

As our shortlist note put it, the book asks ‘whether its author was a culpable partner in a generation that was climbing itself into extinction’. Certainly at times the Yorkshire ACG (and their Polish friends) seemed very like soldiers in an army fighting a war against enemies of their own invention, and the losses sustained were indeed severe. But against that, consideration of the last 20 years on Everest or K2 reveals even greater losses: these mountains are slaughter-houses perched above rubbish-dumps! Perhaps it is just that these Himalayan and Karakorum giants are killers, regardless of the method adopted to climb them. And one might wonder too whether the alpine-style approach to the great Himalayan faces really had aesthetic and ethical roots, or was it just that the climbers couldn’t afford hundreds of porters, miles of fixed rope, and lots of oxygen bottles? John provides us with a detailed history of this ground-breaking style of mountaineering, and at the same time makes the reader share in the suffering endured, in the price paid by the climbers, and by those they left behind.

And now, the awful moment comes. Which of these five excellent books has won the Boardman Tasker Prize? As you may imagine, your judges had considerable difficulty in arriving at their decisions, in selecting their shortlist as well as in making the final choice. But in the end we are delighted to award this year’s prize to the most powerful, focused and committed writing effort we have seen this year – **Barry Blanchard’s *The Calling***.