

The Boardman Tasker Prize 2010

Adjudication by Ian Smith

May I begin by both thanking and paying tribute to my fellow judges Kym Martindale and Barry Imeson. With one in the north-east of England, one in South Yorkshire and one in Cornwall we didn't get the opportunity to meet face to face but with a combination of phone calls and emails I feel that our communication was well up to the task. Although I'm the one standing up here talking to you this adjudication will be very much a collegiate effort and will include comments and opinions from all three of us.

Also, could I publicly acknowledge the debt we owe to Maggie Body who organizes, amongst other aspects of the award, the sending out of the books to the judges, often accompanied by witty, pithy little notes that always raised a smile and sometimes occasioned out-loud laughter, meaning that not only were we left looking forward to the next parcel but also to the accompanying cheering witticisms.

Last year we had over 30 books to judge. This year however began poorly in terms of numbers with, for long enough, only about eight or so books. This raised concerns for me and I found it disappointing that it seemed that the wider world financial problems were hitting this sector of publishing. Particularly, as it seemed that at least one publisher who had produced winning books in previous years had withdrawn from publishing mountaineering books. However, and almost at the last minute, books began to appear regularly and we ended up with a very respectable total of 25 books, which was boiled down to a shortlist of five.

Outwith the shortlist there were books that still impressed but didn't quite make the top tier and I'd like to mention a few of those. The SMC submitted two books, *Ben Nevis* and *The Cairngorms*, that are informative mixes of history and area guide. The Ben book is a heavily revised second edition, the Gorms book is new and they are both excellent examples of the genre, being informative, entertaining and lavishly illustrated. Another book in similar vein is *An Teallach, The Forge* by Lesley Timings with Geoffrey Covell which covers the flora, fauna and social history of one of Scotland's most distinctive mountains. *Joss* by Keith Richardson is a quite beautifully produced book from a small press detailing the life and the career of the exceptional Cumbrian fellrunner, Joss Naylor, which is

enhanced by the attempt from the author to capture the Cumbrian dialect on the page. *The Garden in the Clouds* by Anthony Woodward is an engaging chronicle of the author's attempt to create a garden high in the Black Mountains of South Wales that would be suitable to be included in the Yellow Book of the National Gardens Scheme. Three books this year are set on K2 and one made the short list, so more of that in a moment. One of the others, *The Last Man on the Mountain* by Jennifer Jordan, is a biography of Dudley Wolfe, the American millionaire who became the first casualty on K2 when he died descending the mountain in 1939 as a member of Fritz Weissner's expedition. This book does add some useful elements to the literature surrounding K2, so if you are a student of the history of that iconic mountain, don't be put off by the puff where it's described as 'a story where *The Great Gatsby* meets *Into Thin Air*'. Finally, two books that fall more into the category of travel writing but are definitely entertaining reads are *Two Wheels on my Wagon* by Paul Howard describing a mountain bike race down the spine of the Rockies and *Walking Home* by Lynn Schooler which is a wide ranging sailing/hiking book set in Alaska, covering history, nature, soul-searching and wildlife; a particular chapter detailing an encounter with a bear has appeared as an extract in the UK national press.

On to the shortlist, and in no particular order, I'll begin with *Unjustifiable Risk* by Simon Thompson. This is a well-written and lucid history of British climbing divided into a number of sections, examples of which are: The Alps, The Greater Ranges, Scotland, North Wales and Outcrops. So what we have here is an attempt to cover the activities of British climbers at home and abroad, a big subject that Thompson achieves with a quiet assurance that is peppered with wry comment and seasoned with an obvious delight in the subject matter; it also frequently shows a good social and cultural awareness. Judging by the bibliography the author has worked hard to read just about every significant book published about British climbing and provides us with, in one sensibly sized volume, a useful précis of the subject, perfect for new climbers to get some grasp of just what they've become involved with or for more experienced climbers who can't afford either all the books or the time to read them.

In contrast we have *Climbing Philosophy for Everyone* edited by Stephen E. Schmid. This book of essays makes the brave claim of being 'philosophy for everyone' and our reaction was that there is no 'philosophy for everyone' but it is a challenging, intellectually stimulating and, at times, amusing, book that raises issues that climbers are not always anxious to address. It makes a refreshing change to hear climbers discussing *why* they set about a particular challenge

rather than the usual *what, when* and *how*. It's not all serious, which is the usual perception of philosophy, and some of the arguments and discussions are entertaining and amusing but some are, in the words of Barry Imeson, 'like ascending scree, heavy going'.

Next is the story of the life of a genuine legend of British climbing, *Ron Fawcett, Rock Athlete* by Ron Fawcett with Ed Douglas. This is an engaging portrait of an unassuming yet quite remarkable climber told with humility and frankness. Beginning in the small Yorkshire village of Embsay the book catalogues how Fawcett's talent and drive took him all over the world, repeating the hardest routes wherever he went and pioneering exceptional climbs at home and abroad. As well as climbing Fawcett was also a pioneer in dealing with the commercial pressures and opportunities that were coming into climbing in the 70s and his experiences are honestly explored. Also, Fawcett is not shy of dealing with issues in his personal life and his candour is to be commended. Praise must also be given to Ed Douglas who, presumably, while shaping and forming this book allowed Fawcett's own voice and mannerisms to still shine through. At the conclusion of this book Fawcett emerges as a shy, unassuming and thoroughly likeable person as well as an undoubted climbing legend.

Graham Bowley's *No Way Down* is the aforementioned book about K2 and it describes the catastrophic events on the mountain in the summer of 2008 when 11 climbers died. Bowley admits to not being a climber himself. He is a British journalist who heard about the story when working for *The New York Times*. From writing an article about the deaths for the paper he became more and more fascinated by the subject and determined to write a more detailed analysis. He adopted the discipline and principles of good journalism and travelled widely interviewing survivors and the families and climbing partners of those who perished. The quality of the research and the resultant painstaking writing raise this book from the realms of journalism to a much higher level and he brings an interesting outsider's clarity to the events, which is very refreshing. It is a riveting read and is a sombre tribute to those who died pursuing their passion for high places. It's not easy to sustain the narrative drive when so many people, climbers, rescuers, friends, relatives are involved and to Bowley's credit he does manage to hold the individual stories within the overall framework which drives the story to a satisfying conclusion for the reader. A useful book for students of mountaineering, particularly Himalayan, history.

The only novel to make the short list is New Zealander Laurence Fearnley's *The Hut Builder* which is a convincing mix of fact and fiction set on the South Island. Boden, the protagonist of the novel, begins his painful journey to self-awareness through his appreciation of the landscape and what turns out to be a central event in his life, assisting with the building of a mountain hut. During this time he meets, and is heavily influenced by, a fellow builder, a conscientious objector, Walter, and by meeting and climbing with Edmund Hillary, although through this experience Boden realizes that though he is inspired by mountains he does not wish to be a mountaineer. Fearnley is an experienced novelist and short story writer who has also written about Antarctica.

So a varied and interesting shortlist, but now the part you've all been waiting for and, to conclude, our winner of the Boardman Tasker award for 2010 is *Ron Fawcett, Rock Athlete* by Ron Fawcett with Ed Douglas.